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by LEIGH BRACKETT *and* RAY BRADBURY

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LORELEI OF THE RED MIST

By Leigh Brackett and Ray Bradbury

He died—and then awakened in a new body. He found himself on a world of bizarre loveliness, a powerful, rich man. He took pleasure in his turn of good luck . . . until he discovered that his new body was hated by all on this strange planet, that his soul was owned by Rann, devil-goddess of Falga, who was using him for her own gain.





Illustration by MOORE

THE Company dicks were good. They were plenty good. Hugh Starke began to think maybe this time he wasn't going to get away with it.

His small stringy body hunched over the control bank, nursing the last ounce of power out of the Kallman. The hot night sky of Venus fled past the ports in tattered veils of indigo. Starke wasn't sure where he was any more. Venus was a frontier planet, and still mostly a big X, except to the Venusians—who weren't sending out any maps. He did know that he was getting dangerously close to the Mountains of White Cloud. The backbone of the planet, towering far into the stratosphere, magnetic trap, with God knew what beyond. Maybe even God wasn't sure.

But it looked like over the mountains or out. Death under the guns of the Terro-Venus Mines, Incorporated, Special Police, or back to the Luna cell blocks for life as an habitual felon.

Starke decided he would go over.

Whatever happened, he'd pulled off the biggest lone-wolf caper in history. The T-V Mines payroll ship, for close to a million credits. He cuddled the metal strongbox between his feet and grinned. It would be a long time before anybody equaled that.

His mass indicators began to jitter. Vaguely, a dim purple shadow in the sky ahead, the Mountains of White Cloud stood like a wall against him. Starke checked the positions of the pursuing ships. There was no way through them. He said flatly, "All right, damn you," and sent the Kallman angling up into the thick blue sky.

He had no very clear memories after that. Crazy magnetic vagaries, always a hazard on Venus, made his instruments useless. He flew by the seat of his pants and he got over, and the T-V men didn't. He was free, with a million credits in his kick.

Far below in the virgin darkness he saw a sullen crimson smear on the night, as though someone had rubbed it with a bloody thumb. The Kallman dipped toward it. The control bank flickered with blue flame, the jet timers blew, and then there was just the screaming of air against the falling hull.

Hugh Starke sat still and waited . . .

He knew, before he opened his eyes,

that he was dying. He didn't feel any pain, he didn't feel anything, but he knew just the same. Part of him was cut loose. He was still there, but not attached any more.

He raised his eyelids. There was a ceiling. It was a long way off. It was black stone veined with smoky reds and ambers. He had never seen it before.

His head was tilted toward the right. He let his gaze move down that way. There were dim tapestries, more of the black stone, and three tall archways giving onto a balcony. Beyond the balcony was a sky veiled and clouded with red mist. Under the mist, spreading away from a murky line of cliffs, was an ocean. It wasn't water and it didn't have any waves on it, but there was nothing else to call it. It burned, deep down inside itself, breathing up the red fog. Little angry bursts of flame coiled up under the flat surface, sending circles of sparks flaring out like ripples from a dropped stone.

He closed his eyes and frowned and moved his head restively. There was the texture of fur against his skin. Through the cracks of his eyelids he saw that he lay on a high bed piled with silks and soft tanned pelts. His body was covered. He was rather glad he couldn't see it. It didn't matter because he wouldn't be using it any more anyway, and it hadn't been such a hell of a body to begin with. But he was used to it, and he didn't want to see it now, the way he knew it would have to look.

He looked along over the foot of the bed, and he saw the woman.

She sat watching him from a massive carved chair softened with a single huge white pelt like a drift of snow. She smiled, and let him look. A pulse began to beat under his jaw, very feebly.

She was tall and sleek and insolently curved. She wore a sort of tabard of pale grey spider-silk, held to her body by a jeweled girdle, but it was just a nice piece of ornamentation. Her face was narrow, finely cut, secret, faintly amused. Her lips, her eyes, and her flowing silken hair were all the same pale cool shade of aquamarine.

Her skin was white, with no hint of rose. Her shoulders, her forearms, the long flat curve of her thighs, the pale-green

tips of her breasts, were dusted with tiny particles that glistened like powdered diamond. She sparkled softly like a fairy thing against the snowy fur, a creature of foam and moonlight and clear shallow water. Her eyes never left his, and they were not human, but he knew that they would have done things to him if he had had any feeling below the neck.

HE started to speak. He had no strength to move his tongue. The woman leaned forward, and as though her movement were a signal four men rose from the tapestried shadows by the wall. They were like her. Their eyes were pale and strange like hers.

She said, in liquid High Venusian, "You're dying. in this body. But *you* will not die. You will sleep now, and wake in a strange body, in a strange place. Don't be afraid. My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you, don't be afraid. I can't explain now, there isn't time, but don't be afraid."

He drew back his thin lips baring his teeth in what might have been a smile. If it was, it was wolfish and bitter, like his face.

The woman's eyes began to pour coolness into his skull. They were like two little rivers running through the channels of his own eyes, spreading in silver-green quiet across the tortured surface of his brain. His brain relaxed. It lay floating on the water, and then the twin streams became one broad flowing stream, and his mind, or ego, the thing that was intimately himself, vanished along it.

It took him a long, long time to regain consciousness. He felt as though he'd been shaken until pieces of him were scattered all over inside. Also, he had an instinctive premonition that the minute he woke up he would be sorry he had. He took it easy, putting himself together.

He remembered his name, Hugh Starke. He remembered the mining asteroid where he was born. He remembered the Luna cell blocks where he had once come near dying. There wasn't much to choose between them. He remembered his face decorating half the bulletin boards between Mercury and The Belt. He remembered hearing about himself over the telecasts,

stuff to frighten babies with, and he thought of himself committing his first crime—a stunted scrawny kid of eighteen swinging a spanner on a grown man who was trying to steal his food.

The rest of it came fast, then. The T-V Mines job, the getaway that didn't get, the Mountains of White Cloud. The crash . . .

The woman.

That did it. His brain leaped shatteringly. Light, feeling, a naked sense of reality swept over him. He lay perfectly still with his eyes shut, and his mind clawed at the picture of the shining woman with sea-green hair and the sound of her voice saying, *You will not die, you will wake in a strange body, don't be afraid . . .*

He was afraid. His skin pricked and ran cold with it. His stomach knotted with it. His skin, his stomach, and yet somehow they didn't feel just right, like a new coat that hasn't shaped to you . . .

He opened his eyes, a cautious crack.

He saw a body sprawled on its side in dirty straw. The body belonged to him, because he could feel the straw pricking it, and the itch of little things that crawled and ate and crawled again.

It was a powerful body, rangy and flat-muscled, much bigger than his old one. It had obviously not been starved the first twenty-some years of its life. It was stark naked. Weather and violence had written history on it, wealed white marks on leathery bronze, but nothing seemed to be missing. There was black hair on its chest and thighs and forearms, and its hands were lean and sinewy for killing.

It was a human body. That was something. There were so many other things it might have been that his racial snobbery wouldn't call human. Like the nameless shimmering creature who smiled with strange pale lips.

Starke shut his eyes again.

He lay, the intangible self that was Hugh Starke, belled down in the darkness of the alien shell, quiet, indrawn, waiting. Panic crept up on its soft black paws. It walked around the crouching ego and sniffed and patted and nuzzled, whining, and then struck with its raking claws. After a while it went away, empty.

The lips that were now Starke's lips twitched in a thin, cruel smile. He had

done six months once in the Luna solitary crypts. If a man could do that, and come out sane and on his two feet, he could stand anything. Even this.

It came to him then, rather deflatingly, that the woman and her four companions had probably softened the shock by hypnotic suggestion. His subconscious understood and accepted the change. It was only his conscious mind that was superficially scared to death.

Hugh Starke cursed the woman with great thoroughness, in seven languages and some odd dialects. He became healthily enraged that any dame should play around with him like that. Then he thought, What the hell, I'm alive. And it looks like I got the best of the trade-in!

He opened his eyes again, secretly, on his new world.

HE LAY at one end of a square stone hall, good sized, with two straight lines of pillars cut from some dark Venetian wood. There were long crude benches and tables. Fires had been burning on round brick hearths spaced between the pillars. They were embers now. The smoke climbed up, tarnishing the gold and bronze of shields hung on the walls and pediments, dulling the blades of longwords, the spears, the tapestries and hides and trophies.

It was very quiet in the hall. Somewhere outside of it there was fighting going on. Heavy, vicious fighting. The noise of it didn't touch the silence, except to make it deeper.

There were two men besides Starke in the hall.

They were close to him, on a low dais. One of them sat in a carved high seat, not moving, his big scarred hands flat on the table in front of him. The other crouched on the floor by his feet. His head was bent forward so that his mop of lint-white hair hid his face and the harp between his thighs. He was a little man, a swamp-edger from his albino coloring. Starke looked back at the man in the chair.

The man spoke harshly. "Why doesn't she send word?"

The harp gave out a sudden bitter chord. That was all.

Starke hardly noticed. His whole attention was drawn to the speaker. His heart

began to pound. His muscles coiled and lay ready. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He recognized it. It was hate.

He had never seen the man before, but his hands twitched with the urge to kill.

He was big, nearly seven feet, and muscled like a draft horse. But his body, naked above a gold-bossed leather kilt, was lithe and quick as a greyhound in spite of its weight. His face was square, strong-boned, weathered, and still young. It was a face that had laughed a lot once, and liked wine and pretty girls. It had forgotten those things now, except maybe the wine. It was drawn and cruel with pain, a look as of something in a cage. Starke had seen that look before, in the Luna blocks. There was a thick white scar across the man's forehead. Under it his blue eyes were sunken and dark behind half-closed lids. The man was blind.

Outside, in the distance, men screamed and died.

Starke had been increasingly aware of a soreness and stricture around his neck. He raised a hand, careful not to rustle the straw. His fingers found a long tangled beard, felt under it, and touched a band of metal.

Starke's new body wore a collar, like a vicious dog.

There was a chain attached to the collar. Starke couldn't find any fastening. The business had been welded on for keeps. His body didn't seem to have liked it much. The neck was galled and chafed.

The blood began to crawl up hot into Starke's head. He'd worn chains before. He didn't like them. Especially around the neck.

A door opened suddenly at the far end of the hall. Fog and red daylight spilled in across the black stone floor. A man came in. He was big, half naked, blond, and bloody. His long blade trailed harshly on the flags. His chest was laid open to the bone and he held the wound together with his free hand.

"Word from Beudag," he said. "They've driven us back into the city, but so far we're holding the Gate."

No one spoke. The little man nodded his white head. The man with the slashed chest turned and went out again, closing the door.

A peculiar change came over Starke at

the mention of the name Beudag. He had never heard it before, but it hung in his mind like a spear point, barbed with strange emotion. He couldn't identify the feeling, but it brushed the blind man aside. The hot simple hatred cooled. Starke relaxed in a sort of icy quiet, deceptively calm as a sleeping cobra. He didn't question this. He waited, for Beudag.

The blind man struck his hands down suddenly on the table and stood up. "Romna," he said, "give me my sword."

The little man looked at him. He had milk-blue eyes and a face like a friendly bulldog. He said, "Don't be a fool, Faolan."

Faolan said softly, "Damn you. Give me my sword."

Men were dying outside the hall, and not dying silently. Foalan's skin was greasy with sweat. He made a sudden, darting grab toward Roma.

Romna dodged him. There were tears in his pale eyes. He said brutally, "You'd only be in the way. Sit down."

"I can find the point," Faolan said, "to fall on it."

Romna's voice went up to a harsh scream. "Shut up. Shut up and sit down."

Faolan caught the edge of the table and bent over it. He shivered and closed his eyes, and the tears ran out hot under the lids. The bard turned away, and his harp cried out like a woman.

Faolan drew a long sighing breath. He straightened slowly, came round the carved high seat, and walked steadily toward Starke.

"You're very quiet, Conan," he said. "What's the matter? You ought to be happy, Conan. You ought to laugh and rattle your chain. You're going to get what you wanted. Are you sad because you haven't a mind any more, to understand that with?"

He stopped and felt with one sandaled foot across the straw until he touched Starke's thigh. Starke lay motionless.

"Conan," said the blind man gently, pressing Starke's belly with his foot. "Conan the dog, the betrayer, the butcher, the knife in the back. Remember what you did at Falga, Conan? No, you don't remember now. I've been a little rough with you, and you don't remember any more. But I remember, Conan. As long as I live in darkness, I'll remember."

ROMNA stroked the harp strings and they wept, savage tears for strong men dead of treachery. Low music, distant but not soft. Faolan began to tremble, a shallow animal twitching of the muscles. The flesh of his face was drawn, iron shaping under the hammer. Quite suddenly he went down on his knees. His hands struck Starke's shoulders, slid inward to the throat, and locked there.

Outside, the sound of fighting had died away.

Starke moved, very quickly. As though he had seen it and knew it was there, his hand swept out and gathered in the slack of the heavy chain and swung it.

It started out to be a killing blow. Starke wanted with all his heart to beat Faolan's brains out. But at the last second he pulled it, slapping the big man with exquisite judgment across the back of the head. Faolan grunted and fell sideways, and by that time Romna had come up. He had dropped his harp and drawn a knife. His eyes were startled.

Starke sprang up. He backed off, swinging the slack of the chain warningly. His new body moved magnificently. Outside everything was fine, but inside his psycho-neural setup had exploded into civil war. He was furious with himself for not having killed Faolan. He was furious with himself for losing control enough to want to kill a man without reason. He hated Faolan. He did not hate Faolan because he didn't know him well enough. Starke's trained, calculating, unemotional brain was at grips with a tidal wave of baseless emotion.

He hadn't realized it was baseless until his mental monitor, conditioned through years of bitter control, had stopped him from killing. Now he remembered the woman's voice saying, *My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you . . .*

Catspaw, huh? Just a hired hand, paid off with a new body in return for two lives. Yeah, two. This Beudag, whoever he was. Starke knew now what that cold alien emotion had been leading up to.

"Hold it," said Starke hoarsely. "Hold everything. *Catspaw! You green-eyed she-devil! You picked the wrong guy this time.*

Just for a fleeting instant he saw her again, leaning forward with her hair like running water across the soft foam-sparkle of her shoulders. Her sea-pale eyes were

full of mocking laughter, and a direct, provocative admiration. Starke heard her quite plainly:

"You may not have any choice, Hugh Starke. They know Conan, even if you don't. Besides, it's of no great importance. The end will be the same for them—it's just a matter of time. You can save your new body or not, as you wish." She smiled. "I'd like it if you did. It's a good body. I knew it, before Conan's mind broke and left it empty."

A sudden thought came to Starke. "My box, the million credits."

"Come and get them." She was gone. Starke's mind was clear, with no alien will tramping around in it. Faolan crouched on the floor, holding his head. He said:

"Who spoke?"

Romna the bard stood staring. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Starke said, "I spoke. Me, Hugh Starke. I'm not Conan, and I never heard of Falga, and I'll brain the first guy that comes near me."

Faolan stayed motionless, his face blank, his breath sobbing in his throat. Romna began to curse, very softly, not as though he were thinking about it. Starke watched them.

Down the hall the doors burst open. The heavy reddish mist coiled in with the daylight across the flags, and with them a press of bodies hot from battle, bringing a smell of blood.

Starke felt the heart contract in the hairy breast of the body named Conan, watching the single figure that led the pack.

Romna called out, "Beudag!"

She was tall. She was built and muscled like a lioness, and she walked with a flat-hipped arrogance, and her hair was like coiled flame. Her eyes were blue, hot and bright, as Faolan's might have been once. She looked like Faolan. She was dressed like him, in a leather kilt and sandals, her magnificent body bare above the waist. She carried a longsword slung across her back, the hilt standing above the left shoulder. She had been using it. Her skin was smeared with blood and grime. There was a long cut on her thigh and another across her flat belly, and bitter weariness lay on her like a burden in spite of her denial of it.

"We've stopped them, Faolan," she said.

"They can't breach the Gate, and we can hold Crom Dhu as long as we have food. And the sea feeds us." She laughed, but there was a hollow sound to it. "Gods, I'm tired!"

She halted then, below the dais. Her flame-blue gaze swept across Faolan, across Romna, and rose to meet Hugh Starke's, and stayed there.

The pulse began to beat under Starke's jaw again, and this time his body was strong, and the pulse was like a drum throbbing.

Romna said, "His mind has come back."

THERE was a long, hard silence. No one in the hall moved. Then the men back of Beudag, big brawny kilted warriors, began to close in on the dais, talking in low snarling undertones that rose toward a mob howl. Faolan rose up and faced them, and belowered them to quiet.

"He's mine to take! Let him alone."

Beudag sprang up onto the dais, one beautiful flowing movement. "It isn't possible," she said. "His mind broke under torture. He's been a drooling idiot with barely the sense to feed himself. And now, suddenly, you say he's normal again?"

Starke said, "You know I'm normal. You can see it in my eyes."

"Yes."

He didn't like the way she said that. "Listen, my name is Hugh Starke. I'm an Earthman. This isn't Conan's brain come back. This is a new deal. I got shoved into this body. What it did before I got it I don't know, and I'm not responsible."

Faolan said, "He doesn't remember Falga. He doesn't remember the longships at the bottom of the sea." Faolan laughed.

Romna said quietly, "He didn't kill you, though. He could have, easily. Would Conan have spared you?"

Beudag said, "Yes, if he had a better plan. Conan's mind was like a snake. It crawled in the dark, and you never knew where it was going to strike."

Starke began to tell them how it happened, the chain swinging idly in his hand. While he was talking he saw a face reflected in a polished shield hung on a pillar. Mostly it was just a tangled black mass of hair, mounted on a frame of long, harsh, jutting bone. The mouth was sensu-

ous, with a dark sort of laughter on it. The eyes were yellow. The cruel, brilliant yellow of a killer hawk.

Starke realized with a shock that the face belonged to him.

"A woman with pale green hair," said Beudag softly. "Rann," said Faolan, and Romna's harp made a sound like a high-priest's curse.

"Her people have that power," Romna said. "They can think a man's soul into a spider, and step on it."

"They have many powers. Maybe Rann followed Conan's mind, wherever it went, and told it what to say, and brought it back again."

"Listen," said Starke angrily. "I didn't ask . . ."

Suddenly, without warning, Romna drew Beudag's sword and threw it at Starke.

Starke dodged it. He looked at Romna with ugly yellow eyes. "That's fine. Chain

me up so I can't fight and kill me from a distance." He did not pick up the sword. He'd never used one. The chain felt better, not being too different from a heavy belt or a length of cable, or the other chains he'd swung on occasion.

Romna said, "Is that Conan?"

Faolan snarled, "What happened?"

"Romna threw my sword at Conan. He dodged it, and left it on the ground." Beudag's eyes were narrowed. "Conan could catch a flying sword by the hilt, and he was the best fighter on the Red Sea, barring you, Faolan."

"He's trying to trick us. Rann guides him."

"The hell with Rann!" Starke clashed his chain. "She wants me to kill the both of you, I still don't know why. All right. I could have killed Faolan, easy. But I'm not a killer. I never put down anyone except to save my own neck. So I didn't



The dead warriors of Falga moved silently to battle.

kill him in spite of Rann. And I don't want any part of you, or Rann either. All I want is to get the hell out of here!"

Beudag said, "His accent isn't Conan's. And the look in his eyes is different, too." Her voice had an odd note in it. Romna glanced at her. He fingered a few rippling chords on his harp, and said:

"There's one way you could tell for sure."

A sullen flush began to burn on Beudag's cheekbones. Romna slid unobtrusively out of reach. His eyes danced with malicious laughter.

Beudag smiled, the smile of an angry cat, all teeth and no humor. Suddenly she walked toward Starke, her head erect, her hands swinging loose and empty at her sides. Starke tensed warily, but the blood leaped pleasantly in his borrowed veins.

Beudag kissed him.

Starke dropped the chain. He had something better to do with his hands.

After a while he raised his head for breath, and she stepped back, and whispered wonderingly,

"It isn't Conan."

THE hall had been cleared. Starke had washed and shaved himself. His new face wasn't bad. Not bad at all. In fact, it was pretty damn good. And it wasn't known around the System. It was a face that could own a million credits and no questions asked. It was a face that could have a lot of fun on a million credits.

All he had to figure out now was a way to save the neck; the face was mounted on, and get his million credits back from that beautiful she-devil named Rann.

He was still chained, but the straw had been cleaned up and he wore a leather kilt and a pair of sandals. Faolan sat in his high seat nursing a flagon of wine. Beudag sprawled wearily on a fur rug beside him. Romna sat cross-legged, his eyes veiled sleepily, stroking soft wandering music out of his harp. He looked fey. Starke knew his swamp-edgers. He wasn't surprised.

"This man is telling the truth," Romna said. "But there's another mind touching his. Rann's, I think. Don't trust him."

Faolan growled, "I couldn't trust a god in Conan's body."

Starke said, "What's the setup? All the fighting out there, and this Rann dame try-

ing to plant a killer on the inside. And what happened at Falga? I never heard of this whole damn ocean, let alone a place called Falga."

The bard swept his hand across the strings. "I'll tell you, Hugh Starke. And maybe you won't want to stay in that body any longer."

Starke grinned. He glanced at Beudag. She was watching him with a queer intensity from under lowered lids. Starke's grin changed. He began to sweat. Get rid of this body, hell! It was really a body. His own stringy little carcass had never felt like this.

The bard said, "In the beginning, in the Red Sea, was a race of people having still their fins and scales. They were amphibious, but after a while part of this race wanted to remain entirely on land. There was a quarrel, and a battle, and some of the people left the sea forever. They settled along the shore. They lost their fins and most of their scales. They had great mental powers and they loved ruling. They subjugated the human peoples and kept them almost in slavery. They hated their brothers who still lived in the sea, and their brothers hated them.

"After a time a third people came to the Red Sea. They were rovers from the North. They raided and rieved and wore no man's collar. They made a settlement on Crom Dhu, the Black Rock, and built longships, and took toll of the coastal towns.

"But the slave people didn't want to fight against the rovers. They wanted to fight with them and destroy the sea-folk. The rovers were human, and blood calls to blood. And the rovers like to rule, too, and this is a rich country. Also, the time had come in their tribal development when they were ready to change from nomadic warriors to builders in their own country.

"So the rovers, and the sea-folk, and the slave-people who are caught between the two of them, began their struggle for the land."

The bard's fingers thrummed against the strings so that they beat like angry hearts. Starke saw that Beudag was still watching him, weighing every change of expression on his face. Romna went on:

"There was a woman named Rann, who had green hair and great beauty, and ruled

the sea-folk. There was a man called Faolan of the Ships, and his sister Beudag, which means Dagger-in-the-Sheath, and they two ruled the outland rovers. And there was the man called Conan."

The harp crashed out like a sword-blade striking.

"Conan was a great fighter and a great lover. He was next under Faolan of the Ships, and Beudag loved him, and they were plighted. Then Conan was taken prisoner by the sea-folk during a skirmish, and Rann saw him—and Conan saw Rann."

Hugh Starke had a fleeting memory of Rann's face smiling, and her low voice saying, *It's a good body. I knew it, before . . .*

Beudag's eyes were two stones of blue vitriol under her narrow lids.

"Conan stayed a long time at Falga with Rann of the Red Sea. Then he came back to Crom Dhu, and said that he had escaped, and had discovered a way to take the longships into the harbor of Falga, at the back of Rann's fleet, and from there it would be easy to take the city, and Rann with it. And Conan and Beudag were married."

Starke's yellow hawk eyes slid over Beudag, sprawled like a young lioness in power and beauty. A muscle began to twitch under his cheekbone. Beudag flushed, a slow deep color. Her gaze did not waver.

"So the longships went out from Crom Dhu, across the Red Sea. And Conan led them into a trap at Falga, and more than half of them were sunk. Conan thought his ship was free, that he had Rann and all she'd promised him, but Faolan saw what had happened and went after him. They fought, and Conan laid his sword across Faolan's brow and blinded him; but Conan lost the fight. Beudag brought them home.

"Conan was chained naked in the market place. The people were careful not to kill him. From time to time other things were done to him. After a while his mind broke, and Faolan had him chained here in the hall, where he could hear him babble and play with his chain. It made the darkness easier to bear.

"But since Falga, things have gone badly from Crom Dhu. Too many men were lost, too many ships. Now Rann's people have us bottled up here. They can't break in, we can't break out. And so we stay, until . . ." The harp cried out a bitter question, and was still.

AFTER a minute or two Starke said slowly, "Yeah, I get it. Stalemate for both of you. And Rann figured if I could kill off the leaders, your people might give up." He began to curse. "What a lousy, dirty, sneaking trick! And who told her she could use me . . ." He paused. After all, he'd be dead now. After all, a new body, and a cool million credits. Ah, the hell with Rann. He hadn't asked her to do it. And he was nobody's hired killer. Where did she get off, sneaking around his mind, trying to make him do things he didn't even know about? Especially to someone like Beudag.

Still, Rann herself was nobody's crud.

And just where was Hugh Starke supposed to cut in on this deal? Cut was right. Probably with a longsword, right through the belly. Swell spot he was in, and a good three strikes on him already.

He was beginning to wish he'd never seen the T-V Mines payroll ship, because then he might never have seen the Mountains of White Cloud.

He said, because everybody seemed to be waiting for him to say something, "Usually when there's a deadlock like this, somebody calls in a third party. Isn't there somebody you can yell for?"

Faolan shook his rough red head. "The slave people might rise, but they haven't arms and they're not used to fighting. They'd only get massacred, and it wouldn't help us any."

"What about those other—uh—people that live in the sea? And just what is that sea, anyhow? Some radiation from it wrecked my ship and got me into this bloody mess."

Beudag said lazily, "I don't know what it is. The seas our forefathers sailed on were water, but this is different. It will float a ship, if you know how to build the hull—very thin, of a white metal we mine from the foothills. But when you swim in it, it's like being in a cloud of bubbles. It tingles, and the farther down you go in it the stranger it gets, dark and full of fire. I stay down for hours sometimes, hunting the beasts that live there."

Starke said, "For hours? You have diving suits, then."

"What are they?" Starke told her. She shook her head, laughing. "Why weigh

yourself down that way? There's no trouble to breathe in this ocean."

"For cripesake," said Starke. "Well I'll be damned. Must be a heavy gas, then, radioactive, surface tension under atmospheric pressure, enough to float a light hull, and high oxygen content without any dangerous mixture. Well, well. Okay, why doesn't somebody go down and see if the sea-people will help? They don't like Rann's branch of the family, you said."

"They don't like us, either," said Faolan. "We stay out of the southern part of the sea. They wreck our ships, sometimes." His bitter mouth twisted in a smile. "Did you want to go to them for help?"

Starke didn't quite like the way Faolan sounded. "It was just a suggestion," he said.

Beudag rose, stretching, wincing as the stiffened wounds pulled her flesh. "Come, on, Faolan. Let's sleep."

He rose and laid his hand on her shoulder. Romna's harpstrings breathed a subtle little mockery of sound. The bard's eyes were veiled and sleepy. Beudag did not look at Starke, called Conan.

Starke said, "What about me?"

"You stay chained," said Faolan. "There's plenty of time to think. As long as we have food—and the sea feeds us."

He followed Beudag, through a curtained entrance to the left. Romna got up, slowly, slinging the harp over one white shoulder. He stood looking steadily into Starke's eyes in the dying light of the fires.

"I don't know," he murmured.

Starke waited, not speaking. His face was without expression.

"Conan we knew. Starke we don't know. Perhaps it would have been better if Conan had come back." He ran his thumb absently over the hilt of the knife in his girdle. "I don't know. Perhaps it would have been better for all of us if I'd cut your throat before Beudag came in."

Starke's mouth twitched. It was not exactly a smile.

"You see," said the bard seriously, "to you, from Outside, none of this is important, except as it touches you. But we live in this little world. We die in it. To us, it's important."

The knife was in his hand now. It leaped up glittering into the dregs of the firelight, and fell, and leaped again.

"You fight for yourself, Hugh Starke. Rann also fights through you. I don't know."

Starke's gaze did not waver.

Romna shrugged and put away the knife. "It is written of the gods," he said, sighing. "I hope they haven't done a bad job of the writing."

He went out. Starke began to shiver slightly. It was completely quiet in the hall. He examined his collar, the rivets, every separate link of the chain, the staple to which it was fixed. Then he sat down on the fur rug provided for him in place of the straw. He put his face in his hands and cursed, steadily, for several minutes, and then struck his fists down hard on the floor. After that he lay down and was quiet. He thought Rann would speak to him. She did not.

The silent black hours that walked across his heart were worse than any he had spent in the Luna crypts.

SHE came soft-shod, bearing a candle. Beudag, the Dagger-in-the-Sheath. Starke was not sleep. He rose and stood waiting. She set the candle on the table and came, not quite to him, and stopped. She wore a length of thin white cloth twisted loosely at the waist and dropping to her ankles. Her body rose out of it straight and lovely, touched mystically with shadows in the little wavering light.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "What are you?"

"A man. Not Conan. Maybe not Hugh Starke any more. Just a man."

"I loved the man called Conan, until . . ." She caught her breath, and moved closer. She put her hand on Starke's arm. The touch went through him like white fire. The warm clean healthy fragrance of her tasted sweet in his throat. Her eyes searched his.

"If Rann has such great powers, couldn't it be that Conan was forced to do what he did? Couldn't it be that Rann took his mind and moulded it her way, perhaps without his knowing it?"

"It could be."

"Conan was hot-tempered and quarrelsome, but he . . ."

Starke said slowly, "I don't think you could have loved him if he hadn't been straight."

Her hand lay still on his forearm. She stood looking at him, and then her hand began to tremble, and in a moment she was crying, making no noise about it. Starke drew her gently to him. His eyes blazed yellow in the candlelight.

"Woman's tears," she said impatiently, after a bit. She tried to draw away. "I've been fighting too long, and losing, and I'm tired."

He let her step back, not far. "Do all the women of Crom Dhu fight like men?"

"If they want to. There have always been shield-maidens. And since Falga, I would have had to fight anyway, to keep from thinking." She touched the collar on Starke's neck. "And from seeing."

He thought of Conan in the market square, and Conan shaking his chain and gibbering in Faolan's hall, and Beudag watching it. Starke's fingers tightened. He slid his palms upward along the smooth muscles of her arms, across the straight, broad planes of her shoulders, onto her neck, the proud strength of it pulsing under his hands. Her hair fell loose. He could feel the redness of it burning him.

She whispered, "You don't love me."

"No."

"You're an honest man, Hugh Starke."

"You want me to kiss you."

"Yes."

"You're an honest woman, Beudag."

Her lips were hungry, passionate, touched with the bitterness of tears. After a while Starke blew out the candle . . .

"I could love you, Beudag."

"Not the way I mean."

"The way you mean. I've never said that to any woman before. But you're not like any woman before. And—I'm a different man."

"Strange—so strange. Conan, and yet not Conan."

"I could love you, Beudag—if I lived."

Harpstrings gave a thrumming sigh in the darkness, the faintest whisper of sound. Beudag started, sighed, and rose from the fur rug. In a minute she had found flint and steel and got the candle lighted. Romna the bard stood in the curtained doorway, watching them.

Presently he said, "You're going to let him go."

Beudag said, "Yes."

Romna nodded. He did not seem surprised. He walked across the dais, laying his harp on the table, and went into another room. He came back almost at once with a hacksaw.

"Bend your neck," he said to Starke.

The metal of the collar was soft. When it was cut through Starke got his fingers under it and bent the ends outward, without trouble. His old body could never have done that. His old body could never have done a lot of things. He figured Rann hadn't cheated him. Not much.

He got up, looking at Beudag. Beudag's head was dropped forward, her face veiled behind shining hair.



"There's only one possible way out of Crom Dhu," she said. There was no emotion in her voice. "There's a passage leading down through the rock to a secret harbor, just large enough to moor a skiff or two. Perhaps, with the night and the fog, you can slip through Rann's blockade. Or you can go aboard one of her ships, for Falga." She picked up the candle. "I'll take you down."

"Wait," Starke said. "What about you?"

She glanced at him, surprised. "I'll stay, of course."

He looked into her eyes. "It's going to be hard to know each other that way."

"You can't stay here, Hugh Starke. The people would tear you to pieces the moment you went into the street. They may even storm the hall, to take you. Look here." She set the candle down and led him to a narrow window, drawing back the hide that covered it.

Starke saw narrow twisting streets dropping steeply toward the sullen sea. The longships were broken and sunk in the harbor. Out beyond, riding lights flickering in the red fog, were other ships. Rann's ships.

"Over there," said Beudag, "is the mainland. Crom Dhu is connected to it by a tongue of rock. The sea-folk hold the land beyond it, but we can hold the rock bridge as long as we live. We have enough water, enough food from the sea. But there's no soil nor game on Crom Dhu. We'll be naked after a while, without leather or flax, and we'll have scurvy without grain and fruit. We're beaten, unless the gods send us a miracle. And we're beaten because of what was done at Falga. You can see how the people feel."

Starke looked at the dark streets and the silent houses leaning on each other's shoulders, and the mocking lights out in the fog. "Yeah," he said. "I can see."

"Besides, there's Faolan. I don't know whether he believes your story. I don't know whether it would matter."

Starke nodded. "But you won't come with me?"

She turned away sharply and picked up the candle again. "Are you coming, Romna?"

The bard nodded. He slung his harp over his shoulder. Beudag held back the curtain of a small doorway far to the side. Starke

went through it and Romna followed, and Beudag went ahead with the candle. No one spoke.

THEY went along a narrow passage, past store rooms and armories. They paused once while Starke chose a knife, and Romna whispered: "Wait!" He listened intently. Starke and Beudag strained their ears along with him. There was no sound in the sleeping dun. Romna shrugged. "I thought I heard sandals scraping stone," he said. They went on.

The passage lay behind a wooden door. It led downward steeply through the rock, a single narrow way without side galleries or branches. In some places there were winding steps. It ended, finally, in a flat ledge low to the surface of the cove, which was a small cavern closed in with the black rock. Beudag set the candle down.

There were two little skiffs built of some light metal moored to rings in the ledge. Two long sweeps leaned against the cave wall. They were of a different metal, oddly vaned. Beudag laid one across the thwarts of the nearest boat. Then she turned to Starke. Romna hung back in the shadows by the tunnel mouth.

Beudag said quietly, "Goodbye, man without a name."

"It has to be goodbye."

"I'm leader now, in Faolan's place. Besides, these are my people." Her fingers tightened on his wrists. "If you could..." Her eyes held a brief blaze of hope. Then she dropped her head and said, "I keep forgetting you're not one of us. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Beudag."

Starke put his arms around her. He found her mouth, almost cruelly. Her arms were tight about him, her eyes half closed and dreaming. Starke's hands slip upward, toward her throat, and locked on it.

She bent back, her body like a steel bow. Her eyes got fire in them, looking into Starke's but only for a moment. His fingers pressed expertly on the nerve centers. Beudag's head fell forward limply, and then Romna was on Starke's back and his knife was pricking Starke's throat.

Starke caught his wrist and turned the blade away. Blood ran onto his chest, but the cut was not into the artery. He

threw himself backward onto the stone. Romna couldn't get clear in time. The breath went out of him in a rushing gasp. He didn't let go of the knife. Starke rolled over. The little man didn't have a chance with him. He was tough and quick, but Starke's sheer size smothered him. Starke could remember when Romna would not have seemed small to him. He hit the bard's jaw with his fist. Romna's head cracked hard against the stone. He let go of the knife. He seemed to be through fighting. Starke got up. He was sweating, breathing heavily, not because of his exertion. His mouth was glistening and eager, like a dog's. His muscles twitched, his belly was hot and knotted with excitement. His yellow eyes had a strange look.

He went back to Beudag.

She lay on the black rock, on her back. Candlelight ran pale gold across her brown skin, skirting the sharp strong hollows between her breasts and under the arching rim of her rib-case. Starke knelt, across her body, his weight pressed down against her harsh breathing. He stared at her. Sweat stood out on his face. He took her throat between his hands again.

He watched the blood grow dark in her cheeks. He watched the veins coil on her forehead. He watched the redness blacken in her lips. She fought a little, very vaguely, like someone moving in a dream. Starke breathed hoarsely, animal-like, through an open mouth.

Then, gradually his body became rigid. His hands froze, not releasing pressure, but not adding any. His yellow eyes widened. It was as though he were trying to see Beudag's face and it was hidden in dense clouds.

Back of him, back in the tunnel, was the soft, faint whisper of sanadals on uneven rock. Sandals, walking slowly. Starke did not hear. Beudag's face glimmered deep in a heavy mist below him, a blasphemy of a face, distorted, blackened.

Starke's hands began to open.

They opened slowly. Muscles stood like coiled ropes in his arms and shoulders, as though he moved them against heavy weights. His lips peeled back from his teeth. He bent his neck, and sweat dropped from his face and glittered on Beudag's breast.

Starke was now barely touching Beu-

dag's neck. She began to breathe again, painfully.

Starke began to laugh. It was not nice laughter. "Rann," he whispered. "Rann, you she-devil." He half fell away from Beudag and stood up, holding himself against the wall. He was shaking violently. "I wouldn't use your hate for killing, so you tried to use my passion." He cursed her in a flat sibilant whisper. He had never in his profane life really cursed anyone before.

He heard an echo of laughter dancing in his brain.

Starke turned. Faolan of the Ships stood in the tunnel mouth. His head was bent, listening, his blind dark eyes fixed on Starke as though he saw him.

FAOLAN said softly "I hear you, Starke. I hear the other breathing, but they don't speak."

"They're all right. I didn't mean to do . . ."

Faolan smiled. He stepped out on the narrow ledge. He knew where he was going, and his smile was not pleasant.

"I heard your steps in the passage beyond my room. I knew Beudag was leading you, and where, and why. I would have been here sooner, but it's a slow way in the dark."

The candle lay in his path. He felt the heat of its close to his leg, and stopped and felt for it, and ground it out. It was dark, then. Very dark, except for a faint smudgy glow from the scrap of ocean that lay along the cave floor.

"It doesn't matter," Faolan said, "as long as I came in time."

Starke shifted his weight warily. "Faolan . . ."

"I wanted you alone. On this night of all nights I wanted you alone. Beudag fights in my place now, Conan. My manhoods needs proving."

Starke strained his in the gloom, measuring the ledge, measuring the place where the skiff was moored. He didn't want to fight Faolan. In Faolan's place he would have felt the same. Starke understood perfectly. He didn't hate Faolan, he didn't want to kill him, and he was afraid of Rann's power over him when his emotions got control. You couldn't keep a determined man from killing you and still be

uninvolved emotionally. Starke would be damned if he'd kill anyone to suit Rann.

He moved, silently, trying to slip past Faolan on the outside and get into the skiff. Faolan gave no sign of hearing him. Starke did not breathe. His sandals came down lighter than snowflakes. Faolan did not swerve. He would pass Starke with a foot to spare. They came abreast.

Faolan's hand shot out and caught in Starke's long black hair. The blind man laughed softly and closed in.

Starke swung one from the floor. Do it the quickest way and get clear. But Faolan was fast. He came in so swiftly that Starke's fist jarred harmlessly along his ribs. He was bigger than Starke, and heavier, and the darkness didn't bother him.

Starke bared his teeth. Do it quick, brother, and clear out! Or that green-eyed she-cat. . . . Faolan's brute bulk weighed him down. Faolan's arm crushed his neck. Faolan's fist was knocking his guts loose. Starke got moving.

He'd fought in a lot of places. He'd learned from stokers and tramps, Martian Low-Canalers, red-eyed Nahali in the running gutters of Lhi. He didn't use his knife. He used his knees and feet and elbows and his hands, fist and flat. It was a good fight. Faolan was a good fighter, but Starke knew more tricks.

One more, Starke thought. One more and he's out. He drew back for it, and his heel struck Romna, lying on the rock. He staggered, and Faolan caught him with a clean swinging blow. Starke fell backward against the cave wall. His head cracked the rock. Light flooded crimson across his brain and then paled and grew cooler, a wash of clear silver-green like water. He sank under it . . .

He was tired, desperately tired. His head ached. He wanted to rest, but he could feel that he was sitting up, doing something that had to be done. He opened his eyes.

He sat in the stern of a skiff. The long sweep was laid into its crutch, held like a tiller bar against his body. The blade of the sweep trailed astern in the red sea, and where the metal touched there was a spurt of silver fire and a swirling of brilliant motes. The skiff moved rapidly through the sullen fog, through

a mist of blood in the hot Venusian night.

Beudag crouched in the bow, facing Starke. She was bound securely with strips of the white cloth she had worn. Bruises showed dark on her throat. She was watching Starke with the intent, unwinking, perfectly expressionless gaze of a tigress.

Starke looked away, down at himself. There was blood on his kilt, a brown smear of it across his chest. It was not his blood. He drew the knife slowly out of its sheath. The blade was dull and crusted, still a little wet.

Starke looked at Beudag. His lips were stiff, swollen. He moistened them and said hoarsely, "What happened?"

She shook her head, slowly, not speaking. Her eyes did not waver.

A black, cold rage took hold of Starke and shook him. Rann! He rose and went forward, letting the sweep go where it would. He began to untie Beudag's wrists.

A shape swam toward them out of the red mist. A longship with two heavy sweeps bursting fire astern and a slender figurehead shaped like a woman. A woman with hair and eyes of aquamarine. It came alongside the skiff.

A rope ladder snaked down. Men lined the low rail. Slender men with skin that glistened white like powdered snow, and hair the color of distant shallows.

One of them said, "Come aboard, Hugh Starke."

Starke went back to the sweep. It bit into the sea, sending the skiff in a swift arc away from Rann's ship.

Grapnels flew, hooking the skiff at thwart and gunwale. Bows appeared in the hands of the men, wicked curving things with barbed metal shafts on the string. The man said again, politely, "Come aboard."

Hugh Starke finished untying Beudag. He didn't speak. There seemed to be nothing to say. He stood back while she climbed the ladder and then followed. The skiff was cast loose. The longship veered away, gathering speed.

Starke said, "Where are we going?"

The man smiled. "To Falga."

Starke nodded. He went below with Beudag into a cabin with soft couches covered with spider-silk and panels of dark

wood beautifully painted, dim fantastic scenes from the past of Rann's people. They sat opposite each other. They still did not speak.

THEY raised Falga in the opal dawn—a citadel of basalt cliffs rising sheer from the burning sea, with a long arm holding a harbor full of ships. There were green fields inland, and beyond, cloaked in the eternal mists of Venus, the Mountains of White Clouds lifted spaceward. Starke wished that he had never seen the Mountains of White Cloud. Then, looking at his hands, lean and strong on his long thighs, he wasn't so sure. He thought of Rann waiting for him. Anger, excitement, a confused violence of emotion set him pacing nervously.

Beudag sat quietly, withdrawn, waiting.

The longship threaded the crowded moorings and slid into place alongside a stone quay. Men rushed to make fast. They were human men, as Starke judged humans, like Beudag and himself. They had the shimmering silver hair and fair skin of the plateau peoples, the fine-cut faces and straight bodies. They wore leather collars with metal tags and they went naked like beasts, and they were gaunt and bowed with labor. Here and there a man with pale blue-green hair and resplendent harness stood godlike above the swarming masses.

Starke and Beudag went ashore. They might have been prisoners or honored guests, surrounded by their escort from the ship. Streets ran back from the harbor, twisting and climbing crazily up the cliffs. Houses climbed on each others backs. It had begun to rain, the heavy steaming downpour of Venus, and the moist heat brought out the choking stench of people, too many people.

They climbed, ankle deep in water sweeping down the streets that were half stairway. Thin naked children peered out of the houses, out of narrow alleys. Twice they passed through market squares where women with the blank faces of defeat drew back from stalls of coarse food to let the party through.

There was something wrong. After a while Starke realized it was the silence. In all that horde of humanity no one

laughed, or sang, or shouted. Even the children never spoke above a whisper. Starke began to feel a little sick. Their eyes had a look in them . . .

He glanced at Beudag, and away again.

The waterfront streets ended in a sheer basalt face honeycombed with galleries. Starke's party entered them, still climbing. They passed level after level of huge caverns, open to the sea. There was the same crowding, the same stench, the same silence. Eyes glinted in the half-light, bare feet moved furtively on stone. Somewhere a baby cried thinly, and was hushed at once.

They came out on the cliff top, into the clean high air. There was a city here. Broad streets, lined with trees, low rambling villas of the black rock set in walled gardens, drowned in brilliant vines and giant ferns and flowers. Naked men and women worked in the gardens, or hauled carts of rubbish through the alleys, or hurried on errands, slipping furtively across the main streets where they intersected the news.

The party turned away from the sea, heading toward an ebon palace that sat like a crown above the city. The steaming rain beat on Starke's bare body, and up here you could get the smell of the rain, even through the heavy perfume of the flowers. You could smell Venus in the rain—musky and primitive and savagely alive, a fecund giantess with passion flowers in her outstretched hands. Starke set his feet down like a panther and his eyes burned a smoky amber.

They entered the palace of Rann. . . .

She received them in the same apartment where Starke had come to after the crash. Through a broad archway he could see the high bed where his old body had lain before the life went out of it. The red sea steamed under the rain outside, the rusty fog coiling languidly through the open arches of the gallery. Rann watched them lazily from a raised couch set massively into the wall. Her long sparkling legs sprawled arrogantly across the black spider-silk draperies. This time her tabard was a pale yellow. Her eyes were still the color of shoal-water, still amused, still secret, still dangerous.

Starke said, "So you made me do it after all."

"And you're angry." She laughed, her teeth showing white and pointed as bone needles. Her gaze held Starke's. There was nothing casual about it. Starke's hawk eyes turned molten yellow, like hot gold, and did not waver.

Beudag stood like a bronze spear, her forearms crossed beneath her bare sharp breasts. Two of Rann's palace guards stood behind her.

Starke began to walk toward Rann.

She watched him come. She let him get close enough to reach out and touch her, and then she said slyly, "It's a good boy, isn't it?"

STARKE looked at her for a moment. Then he laughed. He threw back his head and roared, and struck the great corded muscles of his belly with his fist. Presently he looked straight into Rann's eyes and said:

"I know you."

She nodded. "We know each other. Sit down, Hugh Starke." She swung her long legs over to make room, half erect now, looking at Beudag. Starke sat down. He did not look at Beudag.

Rann said, "Will your people surrender now?"

Beudag did not move, not even her eyelids. "If Faolan is dead—yes."

"And if he's not?"

Beudag stiffened. Starke did too.

"Then," said Beudag quietly, "they'll wait."

"Until he is?"

"Or until they must surrender."

Rann nodded. To the guards she said, "See that this woman is well fed and well treated."

Beudag and her escort had turned to go when Starke said, "Wait." The guards looked at Rann, who nodded, and glanced quizzically at Starke. Starke said:

"Is Faolan dead?"

Rann hesitated. Then she smiled. "No. You have the most damnably tough mind, Starke. You struck deep, but not deep enough. He may still die, but . . . No, he's not dead." She turned to Beudag and said with easy mockery, "You needn't hold anger against Starke. I'm the one who should be angry." Her eyes came back to Starke. They didn't look angry.

Starke said, "There's something else.

Conan—the Conan that used to be, before Falga."

"Beudag's Conan."

"Yeah. Why did he betray his people?"

Rann studied him. Her strange pale lips curved, her sharp white teeth glistening wickedly with barbed humor. Then she turned to Beudag. Beudag was still standing like a carved image, but her smooth muscles were ridged with tension, and her eyes were not the eyes of an image.

"Conan or Starke," said Rann, "she's still Beudag, isn't she? All right, I'll tell you. Conan betrayed his people because I put it into his mind to do it. He fought me. He made a good fight of it. But he wasn't quite as tough as you are, Starke."

There was a silence. For the first time since entering the room, Hugh Starke looked at Beudag. After a moment she sighed and lifted her chin and smiled, a deep, faint smile. The guards walked out beside her, but she was more erect and lighter of step than either of them.

"Well," said Rann, when they were gone, "and what about you, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan."

"Have I any choice?"

"I always keep my bargains."

"Then give me my dough and let me clear the hell out of here."

"Sure that's what you want?"

"That's what I want."

"You could stay a while, you know."

"With you."

Rann lifted her frosty-white shoulders. "I'm not promising half my kingdom, or even part of it. But you might be amused."

"I got no sense of humor."

"Don't you even want to see what happens to Crom Dhu?"

Starke got up. He said savagely, "The hell with Crom Dhu."

"And Beudag."

"And Beudag." He stopped, then fixed Rann with uncompromising yellow eyes. "No. Not Beudag. What are you going to do to her?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that."

"I say again, nothing. Whatever is done, her own people will do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that little Dagger-in-the-Sheath will be rested, cared for, and fattened, for a few days. Then I shall take

her aboard my own ship and join the fleet before Crom Dhu. Beudag will be made quite comfortable at the masthead, where her people can see her plainly. She will stay there until the Rock surrenders. It depends on her own people how long she stays. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough."

Starke stared at her. He stared at her a long time. Then he spat deliberately on the floor and said in a perfectly flat voice: "How soon can I get out of here?"

Rann laughed, a small casual chuckle. "Humans," she said, "are so damned queer. I don't think I'll ever understand them." She reached out and struck a gong that stood in a carved frame beside the couch. The soft deep shimmering note had a sad quality of nostalgia. Rann lay back against the silken cushions and sighed.

"Goodbye, Hugh Starke."

A pause. Then, regretfully:

"Goodbye—Conan!"

THEY had made good time along the rim of the Red Sea. One of Rann's galleys had taken them to the edge of the Southern Ocean and left them on a narrow shingle beach under the cliffs. From there they had climbed to the rimrock and gone on foot—High-Starke-Called-Conan and four of Rann's arrogant shining men. They were supposed to be guide and escort. They were courteous, and they kept pace uncomplainingly though Starke marched as though the devil were pricking his heels. But they were armed, and Starke was not.

Sometimes, very faintly, Starke was aware of Rann's mind touching his with the velvet delicacy of a cat's paw. Sometimes he started out of his sleep with her image sharp in his mind, her lips touched with the mocking, secret smile. He didn't like that. He didn't like it at all.

But he liked even less the picture that stayed with him waking or sleeping. The picture he wouldn't look at. The picture of a tall woman with hair like loose fire on her neck, walking on light proud feet between her guards.

She'll be given water, Rann said. Not much, but enough.

Starke gripped the solid squareness of the box that held his million credits and set the miles reeling backward from under his sandals.

On the fifth night one of Rann's men spoke quietly across the campfire. "Tomorrow," he said, "we'll reach the pass."

Starke got up and went away by himself, to the edge of the rimrock that fell sheer to the burning sea. He sat down. The red fog wrapped him like a mist of blood. He thought of the blood on Beudag's breast the first time he saw her. He thought of the blood on his knife, crusted and dried. He thought of the blood poured rank and smoking into the gutters of Crom Dhu. The fog has to be red, he thought. Of all the goddam colors in the universe, it has to be red. Red like Beudag's hair.

He held out his hands and looked at them, because he could still feel the silken warmth of that hair against his skin. There was nothing there now but the old white scars of another man's battles.

He set his fists against his temples and wished for his old body back again—the little stunted abortion that had clawed and scratched its way to survival through sheer force of mind. A most damnably tough mind, Rann had said. Yeah. It had had to be tough. But a mind was a mind. It didn't have emotions. It just figured out something coldly and then went ahead and never questioned, and it controlled the body utterly, because the body was only the worthless machinery that carried the mind around. Worthless. Yeah. The few women he'd ever looked at had told him that—and he hadn't even minded much. The old body hadn't given him any trouble.

He was having trouble now.

Starke got up and walked.

Tomorrow we reach the pass.

Tomorrow we go away from the Red Sea. There are nine planets and the whole damn Belt. There are women on all of them. All shapes, colors, and sizes, human, semi-human, and God knows what. With a million credits a guy could buy half of them, and with Conan's body he could buy the rest. What's a woman, anyway? Only a . . .

Water. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough.

Conan reached out and took hold of a spire of rock, and his muscles stood out like knotted ropes. "Oh God," he whispered, "what's the matter with me?"

"Love."

It wasn't God who answered. It was

Rann. He saw her plainly in his mind, heard her voice like a silver bell.

"Conan was a man, Hugh Starke. He was whole, body and heart and brain. He knew how to love, and with him it wasn't women, but one woman—and her name was Beudag. I broke him, but it wasn't easy. I can't break you."

Starke stood for a long, long time. He did not move, except that he trembled. Then he took from his belt the box containing his million credits and threw it out as far as he could over the cliff edge. The red mist swallowed it up. He did not hear it strike the surface of the sea. Perhaps in that sea there was no splashing. He did not wait to find out.

He turned back along the rimrock, toward a place where he remembered a cleft, or chimney, leading down. And the four skining men who wore Rann's harness came silently out of the heavy luminous night and ringed him in. Their sword-points caught sharp red glimmers from the sky.

Starke had nothing on him but a kilt and sandals, and a cloak of tight-woven spider-silk that shed the rain.

"Rann sent you?" he said.

The men nodded.

"To kill me?"

Again they nodded. The blood drained out of Starke's face, leaving it grey and stony under the bronze. His hand went to his throat, over the gold fastening of his cloak.

The four men closed in like dancers.

STARKE loosed his cloak and swung it like a whip across their faces. It confused them for a second, for a heart-beat—no more, but long enough. Starke left two of them to tangle their blades in the heavy fabric and leaped aside. A sharp edge slipped and turned along his ribs, and then he had reached in low and caught a man around the ankles, and used the thrashing body for a flail.

The body was strangely light, as though the bones in it were no more than rigid membrane, like a fish.

If he had stayed to fight, they would have finished him in seconds. They were fighting men, and quick. But Starke didn't stay. He gained his moment's grace and used it. They were hard on his heels, their

points all but pricking his back as he ran, but he made it. Along the rimrock, out along a narrow tongue that jutted over the sea, and then outward, far outward, into red fog and dim fire that rolled around his plummeting body.

Oh God, he thought, if I guessed wrong and there *is* a beach . . .

The breath tore out of his lungs. His ears cracked, went dead. He held his arms out beyond his head, the thumbs locked together, his neck braced forward against the terrific upward push. He struck the surface of the sea.

There was no splash.

Dim coiling fire that drifted with infinite laziness around him, caressing his body with slow, tingling sparks. A feeling of lightness, as though his flesh had become one with the drifting fire. A sense of suffocation that had no basis in fact and gave way gradually to a strange exhilaration. There was no shock of impact, no crushing pressure. Merely a cushioning softness, like dropping into a bed of compressed air. Starke felt himself turning end over end, pinwheel fashion, and then that stopped, so that he sank quietly and without haste to the bottom.

Or rather, into he crystalline upper reaches of what seemed to be a forest.

He could see it spreading away along the downward-sloping floor of the ocean, into the vague red shadows of distance. Slender fantastic trunks upholding a maze of delicate shining branches, without leaves or fruit. They were like trees exquisitely molded from ice, transparent, holding the lambent shifting fire of the strange sea. Starke didn't think they were, or ever had been, alive. More like coral, he thought, or some vagary of mineral deposit. Beautiful, though. Like something you'd see in a dream. Beautiful, silent, and somehow deadly.

He couldn't explain that feeling of deadliness. Nothing moved in the red drifts between the trunks. It was nothing about the trees themselves. It was just something he sensed.

He began to move among the upper branches, following the downward drop of the slope.

He found that he could swim quite easily. Or perhaps it was more like flying. The dense gas buoyed him up, almost balancing

the weight of his body, so that it was easy to swoop along, catching a crystal branch and using it as a lever to throw himself forward to the next one.

He went deeper and deeper into the heart of the forbidden Southern Ocean. Nothing stirred. The fairy forest stretched limitless ahead. And Starke was afraid.

Rann came into his mind abruptly. Her face, clearly outlined, was full of mockery.

"I'm going to watch you die, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan. But before you die, I'll show you something. Look."

Her face dimmed, and in its place was Crom Dhu rising bleak into the red fog, the longships broken and sunk in the harbor, and Rann's fleet around it in a shining circle.

One ship in particular. The flagship. The vision in Starke's mind rushed toward it, narrowed down to the masthead platform. To the woman who stood there, naked, erect, her body lashed tight with thin cruel cords.

A woman with red hair blowing in the slow wind, and blue eyes that looked straight ahead like a falcon's, at Crom Dhu.

Beudag.

Rann's laughter ran across the picture and blurred it like a ripple of ice-cold water.

"You'd have done better," she said, "to take the clean steel when I offered it to you."

She was gone, and Starke's mind was as empty and cold as the mind of a corpse. He found that he was standing still, clinging to a branch, his face upturned as though by some blind instinct, his sight blurred.

He had never cried before in all his life, nor prayed.

There was no such thing as time, down there in the smoky shadows of the sea bottom. It might have been minutes or hours later than Hugh Starke discovered he was being hunted.

THERE were three of them, slipping easily among the shining branches. They were pale golden, almost phosphorescent, about the size of large hounds. Their eyes were huge, jewel-like in their slim sharp faces. They possessed four members that might have been legs and arms, retracted now against their arrowing bodies. Golden membranes spread wing-like from head to flank, and they moved

like wings, balancing expertly the thrust of the flat, powerful tails.

They could have closed in on him easily, but they didn't seem to be in any hurry. Starke had sense enough not to wear himself out trying to get away. He kept on going, watching them. He discovered that the crystal branches could be broken, and he selected himself one with a sharp forked tip, shoving it swordwise under his belt. He didn't suppose it would do much good, but it made him feel better.

He wondered why the things didn't jump him and get it over with. They looked hungry enough, the way they were showing him their teeth. But they kept about the same distance away, in a sort of crescent formation, and every so often the ones on the outside would make a tentative dart at him, then fall back as he swerved away. It wasn't like being hunted so much as . . .

Starke's eyes narrowed. He began suddenly to feel much more afraid than he had before, and he wouldn't have believed that possible.

The things weren't hunting him at all. They were herding him.

There was nothing he could do about it. He tried stopping, and they swooped in and snapped at him, working expertly together so that while he was trying to stab one of them with his clumsy weapon, the others were worrying his heels like sheep-dogs at a recalcitrant wether.

Starke, like the wether, bowed to the inevitable and went where he was driven. The golden hounds showed their teeth in animal laughter and sniffed hungrily at the thread of blood he left behind him in the slow red coils of fire.

After a while he heard the music.

It seemed to be some sort of a harp, with a strange quality of vibration in the notes. It wasn't like anything he'd ever heard before. Perhaps the gas of which the sea was composed was an extraordinarily good conductor of sound, with a property of diffusion that made the music seem to come from everywhere at once—softly at first, like something touched upon in a dream, and then, as he drew closer to the source, swelling into a racing, rippling flood of melody that wrapped itself around his nerves with a demoniac shiver of ecstasy.

The golden hounds began to fret with excitement, spreading their shining wings, driving him impatiently faster through the crystal branches.

Starke could feel the vibration growing in him—the very fibres of his muscles shuddering in sympathy with the unearthly harp. He guessed there was a lot of the music he couldn't hear. Too high, too low for his ears to register. But he could feel it.

He began to go faster, not because of the hounds, but because he wanted to. The deep quivering in his flesh excited him. He began to breathe harder, partly because of increased exertion, and some chemical quality of the mixture he breathed made him slightly drunk.

The thrumming harp-song stroked and stung him, waking a deeper, darker music, and suddenly he saw Beudag clearly—half-veiled and mystic in the candle light at Faolan's dun; smooth curving bronze, her hair loose fire about her throat. A great stab of agony went through him. He called her name, once, and the harp-song swept it up and away, and then suddenly there was no music any more, and no forest, and nothing but cold embers in Starke's heart.

He could see everything quite clearly in the time it took him to float from the top of the last tree to the floor of the plain. He had no idea how long a time that was. It didn't matter. It was one of those moments when time doesn't have any meaning.

The rim of the forest fell away in a long curve that melted glistening into the spark-shot sea. From it the plain stretched out, a level glassy floor of black obsidian, the spew of some long-dead volcano. Or was it dead? It seemed to Starke that the light here was redder, more vital, as though he were close to the source from which it sprang.

As he looked farther over the plain, the light seemed to coalesce into a shimmering curtain that wavered like the heat veils that dance along the Mercurian Twilight Belt at high noon. For one brief instant he glimpsed a picture on the curtain—a city, black, shining, fantastically turreted, the gigantic reflection of a Titan's dream. Then it was gone, and the immediate menace of the foreground took all of Starke's attention.

HE saw the flock, herded by more of the golden hounds. And he saw the shepherd, with the harp held silent between his hands.

The flock moved sluggishly, phosphorescently.

One hundred, two hundred silent, limply floating warriors drifting down the red dininess. In pairs, singly, or in pallid clusters they came. The golden hounds winged silently, leisurely around them, channeling them in tides that sluiced toward the fantastic ebon city.

The shepherd stood, a crop of obsidian, turning his shark-pale face. His sharp, aquamarine eyes found Starke. His silvery hand leapt beckoning over hard-threads, striking them a blow. Reverberations ran out, seized Starke, shook him. He dropped his crystal dagger.

Hot screens of fire exploded in his eyes, bubbles whirled and danced in his eardrums. He lost all muscular control. His dark head fell forward against the thick blackness of hair on his chest; his golden eyes dissolved into weak, inane yellow, and his mouth loosened. He wanted to fight, but it was useless. This shepherd was one of the sea-people he had come to see, and one way or another he would see him.

Dark blood filled his aching eyes. He felt himself led, nudged, forced first this way, then that. A golden hound slipped by, gave him a pressure which roiled him over into a current of sea-blood. It ran down past where the shepherd stood with only a harp for a weapon.

Starke wondered dimly whether these other warriors in the flock, drifting, were dead or alive like himself. He had another surprise coming.

They were all Rann's men. Men of Falga. Silver men with burning green hair. Rann's men. One of them, a huge warrior colored like powdered salt, wandered aimlessly by on another tide, his green eyes dull. He looked dead.

What business had the sea-people with the dead warriors of Falga? Why the hounds and the shepherd's harp? Questions eddied like lifted silt in Starke's tired, hanging head. Eddied and settled flat.

Starke joined the pilgrimage.

The hounds with deft flickerings of wings, ushered him into the midst of the flock. Bodies brushed against him. Cold

bodies. He wanted to cry out. The cords of his neck constricted. In his mind the cry went forward:

"Are you alive, men of Falga?"

No answer; but the drift of scarred, pale bodies. The eyes in them knew nothing. They had forgotten Falga. They had forgotten Rann for whom they had lifted blade. Their tongues lolling in mouths asked nothing but sleep. They were getting it.

A hundred, two hundred strong they made a strange human river slipping toward the gigantic city wall. Starke-called-Conan and his bitter enemies going together. From the corners of his eyes, Starke saw the shepherd move. The shepherd was like Rann and her people who had years ago abandoned the sea to live on land. The shepherd seemed colder, more fish-like, though. There were small translucent webs between the thin fingers and spanning the long-toed feet. Thin, scarlike gills in the shadow of his tapered chin, lifted and sealed in the current, eating, taking sustenance from the blood-colored sea.

The harp spoke and the golden hounds obeyed. The harp spoke and the bodies twisted uneasily, as in a troubled sleep. A triple chord of it came straight at Starke. His fingers clenched.

"—and the dead shall walk again—"

Another ironic ripple of music.

"—and Rann's men will rise again, this time against her—"

Starke had time to feel a brief, bewildered shivering, before the current hurled him forward. Clamoring drunkenly, witlessly, all about him, the dead, muscleless warriors of Falga, tried to crush past him, all of them at once . . .

Long ago some vast sea Titan had dreamed of avenues struck from black stone. Each stone the size of three men tall. There had been a dream of walls going up and up until they dissolved into scarlet mist. There had been another dream of sea-gardens in which fish hung like erotic flowers, on tendrils of sensitive film-tissue. Whole beds of fish clung to garden base, like colonies of flowers aglow with sunlight. And on occasion a black amoebic presence filtered by, playing the gardener, weeding out an amber flower here, an amythystine bloom there.

And the sea Titan had dreamed of end-

less balustrades and battlements, of windowless turrets where creatures swayed like radium-skinned phantoms, carrying their green plumes of hair in their lifted palms and looked down with curious, insolent eyes from on high. Women with shimmering bodies like some incredible coral harvested and kept high over these black stone streets, each in its archway.

Starke was alone. Falga's warriors had gone off along a dim subterranean vent, vanished. Now the faint beckoning of harp and the golden hounds behind him, turned him down a passage that opened out into a large circular stone room, one end of which opened out into a hall. Around the ebon ceiling, slender schools of fish swam. It was their bright effulgence that gave light to the room. They had been there, breeding, eating, dying, a thousand years, giving light to the place, and they would be there, breeding and dying, a thousand more.

The harp faded until it was only a murmur.

Starke found his feet. Strength returned to him. He was able to see the man in the center of the room well. Too well.

The man hung in the fire tide. Chains of wrought bronze held his thin fleshless ankles so he couldn't escape. His body desired it. It floated up.

It had been dead a long time. It was gaseous with decomposition and it wanted to rise to the surface of the Red Sea. The chains prevented this. Its arms weaved like white scarves before a sunken white face. Black hair trembled on end.

HE WAS one of Faolan's men. One of the Rovers. One of those who had gone down at Falga because of Conan.

His name was Geil.

Starke remembered.

The part of him that was Conan remembered the name.

The dead lips moved.

"Conan. What luck is this! Conan. I make you welcome."

The words were cruel, the lips around them loose and dead. It seemed to Starke an anger and embittered wrath lay deep in those hollow eyes. The lips twitched again.

"I went down at Falga for you and Rann, Conan. Remember?"

Part of Starke remembered and twisted in agony.

"We're all here, Conan. All of us. Clev and Mamt and Bron and Aesur. Remember Aesur, who could shape metal over his spine, prying it with his fingers? Aesur is here, big as a sea-monster, waiting in a niche, cold and loose as string. The sea-shepherds collected us. Collected us for a purpose of irony. Look!"

The boneless fingers hung out, as in a wind, pointing.

Starke turned slowly, and his heart pounded an uneven, shattering drum beat. His jaw clinched and his eyes blurred. That part of him that was Conan cried out. Conan was so much of him and he so much of Conan it was impossible for a cleavage. They'd grown together like pearl material around sand-specule, layer on layer. Starke cried out.

In the hall which this circular room overlooked, stood a thousand men.

In lines of fifty across, shoulder to shoulder, the men of Crom Dhu stared unseeing up at Starke. Here and there a face became shockingly familiar. Old memory cried their names.

"Bron! Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

The collected decomposition of their bodily fluids raised them, drifted them above the flaggings. Each of them was chained, like Geil.

Geil whispered. "We have made a union with the men of Falga!"

Starke pulled back.

"Falga!"

"In death, all men are equals." He took his time with it. He was in no hurry. Dead bodies under-sea are never in a hurry. They sort of bump and drift and bide their time. "The dead serve those who give them a semblance of life. Tomorrow we march against Crom Dhu."

"You're crazy! Crom Dhu is *your* home! It's the place of Beudag and Faolan—"

"And—" interrupted the hanging corpse, quietly, "Conan? Eh?" He laughed. A crystal dribble of bubbles ran up from the slack mouth. "Especially Conan. Conan who sank us at Falga . . ."

Starke moved swiftly. Nobody stopped him. He had the corpse's short blade in an instant. Geil's chest made a cold, silent sheathe for it. The blade went like a fork through butter.

Coldly, without noticing this, Geil's voice spoke out:

"Stab me, cut me. You can't kill me any deader. Make sections of me. Play butcher. A flank, a hand, a heart! And while you're at it, I'll tell you the plan."

Snarling, Starke seized the blade out again. With blind violence he gave sharp blow after blow at the body, cursing bitterly, and the body took each blow, rocking in the red tide a little, and said with a matter-of-fact tone:

"We'll march out of the sea to Crom Dhu's gates. Romna and the others, looking down, recognizing us, will have the gates thrown wide to welcome us." The head tilted lazily, the lips peeled wide and folded down languidly over the words. "Think of the elation, Conan! The moment when Bron and Mannt and Aesur and I and yourself, yes, even yourself, Conan, return to Crom Dhu!"

STARKE saw it, vividly. Saw it like a tapestry woven for him. He stood back, gasping for breath, his nostrils flaring, seeing what his blade had done to Geil's body, and seeing the great stone gates of Crom Dhu crashing open. The deliberation. The happiness, the elation to Faolan and Romna to see old friends returned. Old Rovers, long thought dead. Alive again, come to help! It made a picture!

With great deliberation, Starke struck flat across before him.

Geil's head, severed from its lazy body, began, with infinite tiredness, to float toward the ceiling. As it traveled upward, now facing, now bobbling the back of its skull toward Starke, it finished its nightmare speaking:

"And then, once inside the gates, what then, Conan? Can you guess? Can you guess what we'll do, Conan?"

Starke stared at nothingness, the sword trembling in his fist. From far away he heard Geil's voice:

"—we will kill Faolan in his hall. He will die with surprised lips. Romna's harp will lie in his disemboweled stomach. His heart with its last pulsings will sound the strings. And as for Beudag—"

Starke tried to push the thoughts away, raging and helpless. Geil's body was no longer anything to look at. He had done

all he could to it. Starke's face was bleached white and scraped down to the insane bone of it, "You'd kill your own people!"

Geil's separated head lingered at the ceiling, light-fish illuminating its ghastly features. "Our people? But we have no people? We're another race now. The dead. We do the biddings of the sea-shepherds."

Starke looked out into the hall, then he looked at circular wall.

"Okay," he said, without tone in his voice. "Come out. Where ever you're hiding and using this voice-throwing act. Come on out and talk straight."

In answer, an entire section of ebony stones fell back on silent hingework. Starke saw a long slender black marble table. Six people sat behind it in carved midnight thrones.

They were all men. Naked except for film-like garments about their loins. They looked at Starke with no particular hatred or curiosity. One of them cradled a harp. It was the shepherd who'd drawn Starke through the gate. Amusedly, his webbed fingers lay on the strings, now and then bringing out a clear sound from one of the two hundred strands.

The shepherd stopped Starke's rush forward with a cry of that harp!

The blade in his hand was red hot. He dropped it.

The shepherd put a head on the story. "And then? And then we will march Rann's dead warriors all the way to Falga. There, Rann's people, seeing the warriors, will be overjoyed, hysterical to find their friends and relatives returned. They, too, will fling wide Falga's defenses. And death will walk in, disguised as resurrection."

Starke nodded, slowly, wiping his hand across his cheek. "Back on Earth we call that psychology. Good psychology. But will it fool Rann?"

"Rann will be with her ships at Crom Dhu. While she's gone, the innocent population will let in their lost warriors gladly." The shepherd had amused green eyes. He looked like a youth of some seventeen years. Deceptively young. If Starke guessed right, the youth was nearer to two centuries old. That's how you lived and looked when you were under the Red Sea. Something about the emanations of it kept part of you young.

Starke lidded his yellow hawks' eyes

thoughtfully. "You've got all aces. You'll win. But what's Crom Dhu to you? Why not just Rann? She's one of you, you hate her more than you do the Rovers. Her ancestors came up on land, you never got over hating them for that—"

The shepherd shrugged. "Toward Crom Dhu we have little actual hatred. Except that they are by nature land-men, even if they do rove by boat, and pillagers. One day they might try their luck on the sunken devices of this city."

Starke put a hand out. "We're fighting Rann, too. Don't forget, we're on your side!"

"Whereas we are on no one's," retorted the green-haired youth, "Except our own. Welcome to the army which will attack Crom Dhu."

"Me! By the gods, over my dead body!"

"That," said the youth, amusedly, "is what we intend. We've worked many years, you see, to perfect the plan. We're not much good out on land. We needed bodies that could do the work for us. So, every time Faolan lost a ship or Rann lost a ship, we were there, with our golden hounds, waiting. Collecting. Saving. Waiting until we had enough of each side's warriors. They'll do the fighting for us. Oh, not for long, of course. The Source energy will give them a semblance of life, a momentary electrical ability of walk and combat, but once out of water they'll last only half an hour. But that should be time enough once the gates of Crom Dhu and Falga are open."

STARKE said, "Rann will find some way around you. Get her first. Attack Crom Dhu the following day."

The youth deliberated. "You're stalling. But there's sense in it. Rann is most important. We'll get Falga first, then. You'll have a bit of time in which to raise false hopes."

Starke began to get sick again. The room swam.

Very quietly, very easily, Rann came into his mind again. He felt her glide in like the merest touch of a sea fern weaving in a tide pool.

He closed his mind down, but not before she snatched at a shred of thought. Her aquamarine eyes reflected desire and inquiry.

"Hugh Starke, you're with the sea people?"

Her voice was soft. He shook his head.

"Tell me, Hugh Starke. How are you plotting against Falga?"

He said nothing. He thought nothing. He shut his eyes.

Her fingernails glittered, raking at his mind. "Tell me!"

His thoughts rolled tightly into a metal sphere which nothing could dent.

Rann laughed unpleasantly and leaned forward until she filled every dark horizon of his skull with her shimmering body. "All right. I gave you Conan's body. Now I'll take it away."

She struck him a combined blow of her eyes, her writhing lips, her bone-sharp teeth. "Go back to your old body, go back to your old body, Hugh Starke," she hissed. "Go back! Leave Conan to his idiocy. Go back to your old body!"

Fear had him. He fell down upon his face, quivering and jerking. You could fight a man a sword. But how could you fight this thing in your brain? He began to suck sobbing breaths through his lips. He was screaming. He could not hear himself. Her voice rushed in from the dim outer red universe, destroying him.

"Hugh Starke! Go back to your old body!"

His old body was—dead!

And she was sending him back into it. Part of him shot endwise through red fog.

He lay on a mountain plateau overlooking the harbor of Falga.

Red fog coiled and snaked around him. Flame birds dived eerily down at his staring, blind eyes.

His old body held him.

Putrefaction stuffed his nostrils. The flesh sagged and slipped greasily on his loosened structure. He felt small again and ugly. Flame birds nibbled, picking, choosing between his ribs. Pain gorged him. Cold, blackness, nothingness filled him. Back in his old body. Forever.

He didn't want that.

The plateau, the red fog vanished. The flame birds, too.

He lay once more on the floor of the sea shepherds, struggling.

"That was just a start," Rann told him. "Next time, I'll leave you up there on the

plateau in that body. *Now*, will you tell the plans of the sea people? And go on living in Conan? He's yours, if you tell." She smirked. "You don't want to be dead."

Starke tried to reason it out. Any way he turned was the wrong way. He grunted out a breath. "If I tell, you'll still kill Beudag."

"Her life in exchange for what you know, Hugh Starke."

Her answer was too swift. It had the sound of treachery. Starke did not believe. He would die. That would solve it. Then, at least, Rann would die when the sea people carried out their strategy. That much revenge, at least, damn it.

Then he got the idea.

He coughed out a laugh, raised his weak head to look at the startled sea shepherd. His little dialogue with Rann had taken about ten seconds, actually, but it had seemed a century. The sea shepherd stepped forward.

Starke tried to get to his feet. "Got—got a proposition for you. You with the harp. Rann's inside me. *Now*. Unless you guarantee Crom Dhu and Beudag's safety, I'll tell her some things she might want to be in on!"

The sea shepherd drew a knife.

Starke shook his head, coldly. "Put it away. Even if you get me I'll give the whole damned strategy to Rann."

The shepherd dropped his hand. He was no fool.

Rann tore at Starke's brain. "Tell me! Tell me their plan!"

He felt like a guy in a revolving door. Starke got the sea men in focus. He saw that they were afraid now, doubtful and nervous. "I'll be dead in a minute," said Starke. "Promise me the safety of Crom Dhu and I'll die without telling Rann a thing."

The sea shepherd hesitated, then raised his palm upward. "I promise," he said. "Crom Dhu will go untouched."

Starke sighed. He let his head fall forward until it hit the floor. Then he rolled over, put his hands over his eyes. "It's a deal. Go give Rann hell for me, will you, boys? Give her hell!"

As he drifted into mind darkness, Rann waited for him. Feebly, he told her. "Okay, duchess. You'd kill me even if I'd told you the idea. I'm ready. Try your god-awfullest

to shove me back into that stinking body of mine. I'll fight you all the way there!"

Rann screamed. It was a pretty frustrated scream. Then the pains began. She did a lot of work on his mind in the next minute.

That part of him that was Conan held on like a clam holding to its precious contents.

The odor of putrid flesh returned. The blood mist returned. The flame birds fell down at him in spirals of sparks and blistering smoke, to winnow his naked ribs.

Starke spoke one last word before the blackness took him.

"Beudag."

HE NEVER expected to awaken again.

He awoke just the same.

There was red sea all around him. He lay on a kind of stone bed, and the young sea shepherd sat beside him, looking down at him, smiling delicately.

Starke did not dare move for a while. He was afraid his head might fall off and whirl away like a big fish, using its ears as propellers. "Lord," he muttered, barely turning his head.

The sea creature stirred. "You won. You fought Rann, and won."

Starke groaned. "I feel like something passed through a wild-cat's intestines. She's gone. Rann's gone." He laughed. "That makes me sad. Somebody cheer me up. Rann's gone." He felt of his big, flat-muscled body. "She was bluffing. Trying to drive me batty. She knew she couldn't really tuck me back into that carcass, but she didn't want me to know. It was like a baby's nightmare before it's born. Or maybe you haven't got a memory like me." He rolled over, stretching. "She won't ever get in my head again. I've locked the gate and swallowed the key." His eyes dilated. "What's *your* name?"

"Linnl," said the man with the harp. "You didn't tell Rann our strategy?"

"What do *you* think?"

Linnl smiled sincerely. "I think I like you, man of Crom Dhu. I think I like your hatred for Rann. I think I like the way you handled the entire matter, wanted to kill Rann and save Crom Dhu, and being so willing to die to accomplish either."

"That's a lot of thinking. Yeah, and what about that promise you made?"

"It will be kept."

Starke gave him a hand. "Linnl, you're okay. If I ever get back to Earth, so help me, I'll never bait a hook again and drop it in the sea." It was lost to Linnl. Starke forgot it, and went on, laughing. There was an edge of hysteria to it. Relief. You got booted around for days, people milled in and out of your mind like it was a bargain basement counter, pawing over the treads and convolutions, yelling and fighting; the woman you loved was starved on a ship masthead, and as a climax a lady with green eyes tried to make you a filling for an accident-mangled body. And now you had an ally.

And you couldn't believe it.

He laughed in little starts and stops, his eyes shut.

"Will you let me take care of Rann when the time comes?"

His fingers groped hungrily upward, closed on an imaginary figure of her, pressed, tightened, choked.

Linnl said, "She's yours. I'd like the pleasure, but you have as much if not more of a revenge to take. Come along. We start now. You've been asleep for one entire period."

Starke let himself down gingerly. He didn't want to break a leg off. He felt if someone touched him he might disintegrate.

He managed to let the tide handle him, do all the work. He swam carefully after Linnl down three passageways where an occasional silver inhabitant of the city slid by.

Drifting below them in a vast square hall, each gravitating but imprisoned by leg-shackles, the warriors of Falga looked up with pale cold eyes at Starke and Linnl. Occasional discharges of light-fish from interstices in the walls, passed luminous, fleeting glows over the warriors. The light-fish flirted briefly in a long shining rope that tied knots around the dead faces and as quickly untied them. Then the light-fish pulsed away and the red color of the sea took over.

Bathed in wine, thought Starke, without humor. He leaned forward.

"Men of Falga!"

Linnl plucked a series of harp-threads. "Aye." A deep suggestion of sound issued from a thousand dead lips.

"We go to sack Rann's citadel!"

"Rann!" came the muffled thunder of voices.

At the sound of another tune, the golden hounds appeared. They touched the chains. The men of Falga, released, danced through the red sea substance.

Siphoned into a valve mouth, they were drawn out into a great volcanic courtyard. Starke went close after. He stared down into a black ravine, at the bottom of which was a blazing caldera.

This was the Source Life of the Red Sea. Here it had begun a millennium ago. Here the savage cyclones of sparks and fire energy belched up, shaking titanic black garden walls, causing currents and whirlpools that threatened to suck you forward and shoot you violently up to the surface, in cannulas of force, thrust, in capillaries of ignited mist, in chutes of color that threatened to cremate but only exhilarated you, gave you a seething rebirth!

He braced his legs and fought the suction. An unbelievable sinew of fire sprang up from out the ravine, crackling and roaring.

The men of Falga did not fight the attraction.

They moved forward in their silence and hung over the incandescence.

The vitality of the Source grew upward in them. It seemed to touch their sandaled toes first, and then by a process of shining osmosis, climb up the limbs, into the loins, into the vitals, delineating their strong bone structure as mercury delineates the glass thermometer with a rise of temperature. The bones flickered like carved polished ivory through the momentarily film-like flesh. The ribs of a thousand men expanded like silvered spider legs, clenched, then expanded again. Their spines straightened, their shoulders flattened back. Their eyes, the last to take the fire, now were ignited and glowed like candles in refurbished sepulchers. The chins snapped up, the entire outer skins of their bodies broke into silver brilliance.

Swimming through the storm of energy like nightmare figments, entering cold, they reached the far side of the ravine resembling smelted metal from blast furnaces. When they brushed into one another, purple sparks sizzled, jumped from head to head, from hand to hand.

Linnl touched Starke's arm. "You're next."

"No thank you."

"Afraid?" laughed the harp-shepherd. "You're tired. It will give you new life. You're next."

STARKE hesitated only a moment. Then he let the tide drift him rapidly out. He was afraid. Damned afraid. A belch of fire caught him as he arrived in the core of the ravine. He was wrapped in layers of ecstasy. Beudag pressed against him. It was her consuming hair that netted him and branded him. It was her warmth that crept up his body into his chest and into his head. Somebody yelled somewhere in animal delight and unbearable passion. Somebody danced and threw out his hands and crushed that solar warmth deeper into his huge body. Somebody felt all tiredness, oldness flumed away, a whole new feeling of warmth and strength inserted.

That somebody was Starke.

Waiting on the other side of the ravine were a thousand men of Falga. What sounded like a thousand harps began playing now, and as Starke reached the other side, the harps began marching, and the warriors marched with them. They were still dead, but you would never know it. There were no minds inside those bodies. The bodies were being activated from outside. But you would never know it.

They left the city behind. In embering ranks, the soldier-fighters were led by golden hounds and distant harps to a place where a huge intra-coastal tide swept by.

They got on the tide for a free ride. Linnl beside him, using his harp, Starke felt himself sucked down through a deep where strange monsters sprawled. They looked at Starke with hungry eyes. But the harp wall swept them back.

Starke glanced about at the men. They don't know what they're doing, he thought. Going home to kill their parents and their children, to set the flame to Falga, and they don't know it. Their alive-but-dead faces tilted up, always upward, as though visions of Rann's citadel were there.

Rann. Starke let the warth simmer in him. He let it cool. Then it was cold. Rann hadn't bothered him now for hours. Was there a chance she'd read his thought in

the midst of that fighting nightmare? Did she know this plan for Falga? Was that an explanation for her silence now?

He sent his mind ahead, subtly. *Rann. Rann.* The only answer was the move of silver bodies through the fiery deeps.

Just before dawn they broke the surface of the sea.

Falga drowns in the red-smeared fog silence. Its slave streets were empty and dew-covered. High up, the first light was bathing Rann's gardens and setting her citadel aglow.

Linnl lay in the shallows beside Starke. They both were smiling half-cruel smiles. They had waited long for this.

Linnl nodded, "This is the day of the carnival. Fruit, wine and love will be offered the returned soldiers of Rann. In the streets there'll be dancing."

Far over to the right lay a rise of mountain. At its blunt peak—Starke stared at it intently—rested a body of a little, scrawny Earthman, with flame-birds clustered on it. He'd climb that mountain later. When it was over and there was time.

"What are you searching for?" asked Linnl.

Starke's voice was distant. "Someone I used to know."

Filing out on the stone quays, their rustling sandals eroded by time, the men stood clean and bright. Starke paced, a caged animal, at their center, so his dark body would pass unnoticed.

They were seen.

The cliff guard looked down over the dirty slave dwellings, from their arrow galleries, and set up a cry. Hands waved, pointed frosty white in the dawn. More guards loped down the ramps and galleries, meeting, joining others and coming on.

Linnl, in the sea by the quay, suggested a theme on the harp. The other harps took it up. The shuddering music lifted from the water and with a gentle firmness, set the dead feet marching down the quays, upward through the narrow, stifling alleys of the slaves, to meet the guard.

Slave people peered out at them tiredly from their choked quarters. The passing of warriors was old to them, of no significance.

These warriors carried no weapons. Starke didn't like that part of it. A length of chain even, he wanted. But this emptiness of the hands. His teeth ached from too

long a time of clenching his jaws tight. The muscles of his arms were feverish and nervous.

At the edge of the slave community, at the cliff base, the guard confronted them. Running down off the galleries, swords naked, they ran to intercept what they took to be an enemy.

The guards stopped in blank confusion.

A LITTLE laugh escaped Starke's lips. It was a dream. With fog over, under and in between its parts. It wasn't real to the guard, who couldn't believe it. It wasn't real to these dead men either, who were walking around. He felt alone. He was the only live one. He didn't like walking with dead men.

The captain of the guard came down warily, his green eyes suspicious. The suspicion faded. His face fell apart. He had lain on his fur pelts for months thinking of his son who had died to defend Falga.

Now his son stood before him. Alive.

The captain forgot he was captain. He forgot everything. His sandals scraped over stones. You could hear the air go out of his lungs and come back in in a numbed prayer.

"My son! In Rann's name. They said you were slain by Faolan's men one hundred darknesses ago. My son!"

A harp tinkled somewhere.

The son stepped forward, smiling.

They embraced. The son said nothing. He couldn't speak.

This was the signal for the others. The whole guard, shocked and surprised, put away their swords and sought out old friends, brothers, fathers, uncles, sons!

They moved up the galleries, the guard and the returned warriors, Starke in their midst. Threading up the cliff, through passage after passage, all talking at once. Or so it seemed. The guards did the talking. None of the dead warriors replied. They only *seemed* to. Starke heard the music strong and clear everywhere.

They reached the green gardens atop the cliff. By this time the entire city was awake. Women came running, bare-breasted and sobbing, and throwing themselves forward into the ranks of their lovers. Flowers showered over them.

"So this is war," muttered Starke, uneasily.

They stopped in the center of the great gardens. The crowd milled happily, not yet aware of the strange silence from their men. They were too happy to notice.

"Now," cried Starke to himself. "Now's the time. Now!"

As if in answer, a wild skirling of harps out of the sky.

The crowd stopped laughing only when the returned warriors of Falga swept forward, their hands lifted and groping before them . . .

The crying in the streets was like a far siren wailing. Metal made a harsh clangor that was sheathed in silence at the same moment metal found flesh to lie in. A vicious pantomime was concluded in the green moist gardens.

Starke watched from Rann's empty citadel. Fog plumes strolled by the archways and a thick rain fell. It came like a blood squall and washed the garden below until you could not tell rain from blood.

The returned warriors had gotten their swords by now. First they killed those nearest them in the celebration. Then they took the weapons from the victims. It was very simple and very unpleasant.

The slaves had joined battle now. Swarming up from the slave town, plucking up fallen daggers and short swords, they circled the gardens, happening upon the arrogant shining warriors of Rann who had so far escaped the quiet, deadly killing of the alive-but-dead men.

Dead father killed startled, alive son. Dead brother garroted unbelieving brother. Carnival indeed in Falga.

An old man waited alone. Starke saw him. The old man had a weapon, but refused to use it. A young warrior of Falga, harped on by Linnl's harp, walked quietly up to the old man. The old man cried out. His mouth formed words. "Son! What is this?" He flung down his blade and made to plead with his boy.

The son stabbed him with silent efficiency, and without a glance at the body, walked onward to find another.

Starke turned away, sick and cold.

A thousand such scenes were being finished.

He set fire to the black spider-silk tapestries. They whispered and talked with flame. The stone echoed his feet as he searched room after room. Rann had gone,

probably last night. That meant that Crom Dhu was on the verge of falling. Was Faolan dead? Had the people of Crom Dhu, seeing Beudag's suffering, given in? Falga's harbor was completely devoid of ships, except for small fishing skiffs.

The fog waited him when he returned to to the garden. Rain found his face.

The citadel of Rann was fire-encrusted and smoke shrouded as he looked up at it.

A silence lay in the garden. The fight was over.

The men of Falga, still shining with Source-Life, hung their blades from uncomprehending fingers, the light beginning to leave their green eyes. Their skin looked dirty and dull.

Starke wasted no time getting down the galleries, through the slave quarter, and to the quays again.

Linnl awaited him, gently petting the obedient harp.

"It's over. The slaves will own what's left. They'll be our allies, since we've freed them."

Starke didn't hear. He was squinting off over the Red Sea.

Linnl understood. He plucked two tones from the harp, which pronounced the two words uppermost in Starke's thought.

"Crom Dhu."

"If we're not too late." Starke leaned forward. "If Faolan lives. If Beudag still stands at the masthead."

Like a blind man he walked straight ahead, until he fell into the sea.

IT WAS not quite a million miles to Crom Dhu. It only seemed that far.

A sweep of tide picked them up just off shore from Falga and siphoned them rapidly, through deeps along coastal latitudes, through crystal forests. He cursed every mile of the way.

He cursed the time it took to pause at the Titan's city to gather fresh men. To gather Clev and Mannt and Aesur and Bruce. Impatiently, Starke watched the whole drama of the Source-Fire and the bodies again. This time it was the bodies of Crom Dhu men, hung like beasts on slow-turned spits, their limbs and vitals soaking through and through, their skins taking bronze color, their eyes holding flint-sparks. And then the harps wove a garment

around each, and the garment moved the men instead of the men the garment.

In the tidal basile now, Starke twisted. Coursing behind him were the new bodies of Clev and Aesur! The current elevated them, poked them through obsidian needle-eyes like spider silk threads.

There was good irony in this. Crom Dhu's men, fallen at Falga under Conan's treachery, returned now under Conan, to exonerate that treachery.

Suddenly they were in Crom Dhu's outer basin. Shadows swept over them. The long dark falling shadows of Falga's long-boats lying in that harbor. Shadows like black culling-nets let down. The school of men cleaved the shadow nets. The tide ceased here, eddied and distilled them.

Starke glared up at the immense silver bottom of a Falgian ship. He felt his face stiffen and his throat tighten. Then, flexing knees, he rammed upward, night air broke dark red around his head.

The harbor held flare torches on the rims of long ships. On the neck of land that led from Crom Dhu to the mainland the continuing battle sounded. Faint cries and clashing made their way through the fog veils. They sounded like echoes of past dreams.

Linn let Starke have the leash. Starke felt something pressed into his fist. A coil of slender green woven reeds, a rope with hooked weights on the end of it. He knew how to use it without asking. But he wished for a knife, now, even though he realized carrying a knife in the sea was all but impossible if you wanted to move fast.

He saw the sleek naked figurehead of Rann's best ship a hundred yards away, a floating silhouette, its torches hanging fire like Beudag's hair.

He swam toward it, breathing quietly. When at last the silvered figurehead with the mocking green eyes and the flag of shoal-shallow hair hung over him, he felt the cool white ship metal kiss his fingers.

The smell of torch-smoke lingered. A rise of faint shouts from the land told of another rush upon the Gate. Behind him—a ripple. Then—a thousand ripples.

The resurrected men of Crom Dhu rose in dents and stirrings of sparkling wine. They stared at Crom Dhu and maybe they knew what it was and maybe they didn't. For one moment, Starke felt appre-

hension. Suppose Linn was playing a game. Suppose, once these men had won the battle, they went on into Crom Dhu, to rupture Romna's harp and make Faolan the blinder? He shook the thought away. That would have to be handled in time. On either side of him Clev and Mann appeared. They looked at Crom Dhu, their lips shut. Maybe they saw Faolan's cyrie and heard a harp that was more than these harps that sang them to blade and plunder—Romna's instrument telling bard-tales of the rovers and the coastal wars and the old, living days. Their eyes looked and looked at Crom Dhu, but saw nothing.

The sea shepherds appeared now; the followers of Linni, each with his harp and the harp music began, high. So high you couldn't hear it. It wove a tension on the air.

Silently, with a grim certainty, the dead-but-not-dead gathered in a bronze circle about Rann's ship. The very silence of their encirclement made your skin crawl and sweat break cold on your creeks.

A dozen ropes went raveling, looping over the ship side. They caught, held, grappelled, hooked.

Starke had thrown his, felt it bite and hold. Now he scrambled swiftly, cursing, up its length, kicking and slipping at the silver hull.

He reached the top.

Beudag was there.

Half over the low rail he hesitated, just looking at her.

TORCHLIGHT limned her, shadowed her. She was still erect; her head was tired and her eyes were closed, her face thinned and less brown, but she was still alive. She was coming out of a deep stupor now, at the whistle of ropes and the grate of metal hooks on the deck.

She saw Starke and her lips parted. She did not look away from him. His breath came out of him, choking.

It almost cost him his life, his standing there, looking at her.

A guard, with flesh like new snow, shafted his bow from the turret and let it loose. A chain lay on deck. Thankfully, Starke took it.

Clev came over the rail beside Starke. His chest took the arrow. The shaft burst half through and stopped, held. Clev kept

going after the man who had shot it. He caught up with him.

Beudag cried out. "Behind you, Conan!"

Conan! In her excitement, she gave the old name.

Conan he *was*. Whirling, he confronted a wiry little fellow, chained him brutally across the face, seized the man's falling sword, used it on him. Then he walked in, got the man's jaw, unbalanced him over into the sea.

The ship was awake now. Most of the men had been down below, resting from the battles. Now they came pouring up, in a silver spate. Their yelling was in strange contrast to the calm silence of Crom Dhu's men. Starke found himself busy.

Conan had been a healthy animal, with great recuperative powers. Now his muscles responded to every trick asked of them. Starke leaped cleanly across the deck, watching for Rann, but she was no where to be seen. He engaged two blades, dispatched one of them. More ropes raveled high and snaked him. Every ship in the harbor was exploding with violence. More men swarmed over the rail behind Starke, silently.

Above the shouting, Beudag's voice came, at sight of the fighting men. "Clev! Mantt! Aesur!"

Starke was a god, anything he wanted he could have. A man's head? He could have it. It meant acting the guillotine with knife and wrist and lunged body. Like—*this!* His eyes were smoking amber and there were deep, lines of grim pleasure tugging at his lips. An enemy cannot fight without hands. One man, facing Starke, suddenly displayed violent stumps before his face, not believing them.

Are you watching, Faolan cried Starke inside himself, delivering blows. Look here, Faolan! God, no, you're blind. *Listen* then! Hear the ring of steel on steel. Does the smell of hot blood and hot bodies reach you? Oh, if you could see this tonight, Faolan. Falga would be forgotten. This is Conan, out of idiocy, with a guy named Starke wearing him and telling him where to go!

It was not safe on deck. Starke hadn't particularly noticed before, but the warriors of Crom Dhu didn't care whom they attacked now. They were beginning to do surgery to one another. They excised one

another's shoulders, severed limbs in blind instantaneous obedience. This was no place for Beudag and himself.

He cut her free of the masthead, drew her quickly to the rail.

Beudag was laughing. She could do nothing but laugh. Her eyes were shocked. She saw dead men alive again, lashing out with weapons; she had been starved and made to stand night and day, and now she could only laugh.

Starke shook her.

She did not stop laughing.

"Beudag! You're all right. You're free."

She stared at nothing. "I'll—I'll be all right in a minute."

He had to ward off a blow from one of his own men. He parried the thrust, then got in and pushed the man off the deck, over into the sea. That was the only thing to do. You couldn't kill them.

Beudag stared down at the tumbling body.

"Where's Rann?" Starke's yellow eyes narrowed, searching.

"She *was* here." Beudag trembled.

Rann looked out of her eyes. Out of the tired numbness of Bendag, an echo of Rann. Rann was nearby, and this was her doing.

Instinctively, Starke raised his eyes.

Rann appeared at the masthead, like a flurry of snow. Her green-tipped breasts were rising and falling with emotion. Pure hatred lay in her eyes. Starke licked his lips and readied his sword.

Rann snapped a glance at Beudag. Stooping, as in a dream, Beudag picked up a dagger and held it to her own breast.

Starke froze.

Rann nodded, with satisfaction. "Well, Starke? How will it be? Will you come at me and have Beudag die? Or will you let me go free?"

Starke's palms felt sweaty and greasy. "There's no place for you to go. Falga's taken. I can't guarantee your freedom. If you want to go over the side, into the sea, that's your chance. You might make shore and your own men."

"Swimming? With the sea-beasts waiting?" She accented the *beasts* heavily. She was one of the *sea-people*. They, Linnl and his men, were *sea-beasts*. "No, Hugh Starke. I'll take a skiff. Put Beudag at the rail where I can watch her all the way.

Guarantee my passage to shore and my own men there, and Beudag lives."

Starke waved his sword. "Get going."

He didn't want to let her go. He had other plans, good plans for her. He shouted the deal down at Linnl. Linnl nodded back, with much reluctance.

Rann, in a small silver skiff, headed toward land. She handed the boat and looked back at Beudag all the while. She passed through the sea-beasts and touched the shore. She lifted her hand and brought it smashing down.

Whirling, Starke swung his fist against Beudag's jaw. Her hand was already striking the blade into her breast. Her head flopped back. His fist carried through. She fell. The blade clattered. He kicked it overboard. Then he lifted Beudag. She was warm and good to hold. The blade had only pricked her breast. A small rivulet of blood ran.

On the shore, Rann vanished upward on the rocks, hurrying to find her men.

In the harbor the harp music paused. The ships were taken. Their crews lay filling the decks. Crom Dhu's men stopped fighting as quickly as they'd started. Some of the bright shining had dulled from the bronze of their arms and bare torsos. The ships began to sink.

Linnl swam below, looking up at Starke. Starke looked back at him and nodded at the beach. "Swell. Now, let's go get that she-devil," he said.

FAOLAN waited on his great stone balcony, overlooking Crom Dhu. Behind him the fires blazed high and their eating sound of flame on wood filled the pillared gloom with sound and furious light.

Faolan leaned against the rim, his chest swathed in bandage and healing ointment, his blind eyes flickering, looking down again and again with a fixed intensity, his head tilted to listen.

Romna stood beside him, filled and refilled the cup that Faolan emptied into his thirsty mouth, and told him what happened. Told of the men pouring out of the sea, and Rann appearing on the rocky shore. Sometimes Faolan leaned to one side, weakly, toward Romna's words. Sometimes he twisted to hear the thing itself, the thing that happened down be-

yond the Gate of besieged Falga.

Romna's harp lay untouched. He didn't play it. He didn't need to. From below, a great echoing of harps, more liquid than his, like a waterfall drenched the city, making the fog sob down red tears.

"Are those harps?" cried Faolan.

"Yes, harps!"

"What was that?" Faolan listened, breathing harshly, clutching for support.

"A skirmish," said Romna.

"Who won?"

"We won."

"And that?" Faolan's blind eyes tried to see until they watered.

"The enemy falling back from the Gate!"

"And that sound, and that sound!" Faolan went on and on, feverishly, turning this way and that, the lines of his face agonized and attentive to each eddy and current and change of tide. The rhythm of swords through fog and body was a complicated music whose themes he must recognize. "Another fell! I heard him cry. And another of Rann's men!"

"Yes," said Romna.

"But why do our warriors fight so quietly? I've heard nothing from their lips. So quiet."

Romna scowled. "Quiet. Yes—quiet."

"And where did they come from? All our men are in the city?"

"Aye." Romna shifted. He hesitated, squinting. He rubbed his bulldog jaw. "Except those that died at—Falga."

Faolan stood there a moment. Then he rapped his empty cup.

"More wine, bard. More wine."

He turned to the battle again.

"Oh, gods, if I could see it, if I could only see it!"

Below, a ringing crash. A silence. A shouting, a pouring of noise.

"The Gate!" Faolan was stricken with fear. "We've lost! My sword!"

"Stay, Faolan!" Romna laughed. Then he sighed. It was a sigh that did not believe. "In the name of ten thousand mighty gods. Would that I were blind now, or could see better."

Faolan's hand caught, held him. "What is it? Tell!"

"Clev! And Tlan! And Conan! And Blucc! And Mannt! Standing in the gate, like wine visions! Swords in their hands!"

Faolan's hand relaxed, then tightened.

"Speak their names again, and speak them slowly. And tell the truth." His skin shivered like that of a nervous animal. "You said—Clev? Mannt? Bluce?"

"And Tlan! And Conan! Back from Falga. They've opened the Gate and the battle's won. It's over, Faolan. Crom Dhu will sleep tonight."

Faolan let him go. A sob broke from his lips. "I will get drunk. Drunker than ever in my life. Gloriously drunk. Gods, but if I could have seen it. Been in it. Tell me again of it, Romna . . ."

FAOLAN sat in the great hall, on his carved high-seat, waiting.

The pad of sandals on stone, outside, the jangle of chains.

A door flung wide, red fog sluiced in, and in the sluice, people walking. Faolan started up. "Clev? Mannt? Aesur!"

Starke came forward into the fire-light. He pressed his right hand to the open mout hof wound on his thigh. "No, Faolan. Myself and two others."

"Beudag?"

"Yes." And Beudag came wearily to him.

Faolan stared. "Who's the other? It walks light. It's a woman."

Starke nodded. "Rann."

Faolan rose carefully from his seat. He thought the name over. He took a short sword from a place beside the high seat. He stepped down. He walked toward Starke. "You brought Rann alive to me?"

Starke pulled the chain that bound Rann. She ran forward in little steps, her white face down, her eyes slitted with animal fury.

"Faolan's blind," said Starke. "I let you live for one damned good reason, Rann. Okay, go ahead."

Faolan stopped walking, curious. He waited.

Rann did nothing.

Starke took her hand and wrenched it behind her back. "I said 'go ahead.' Maybe you didn't hear me."

"I will," she gasped, in pain.

Starke released her. "Tell me what happens, Faolan."

Rann gazed steadily at Faolan's tall figure there in the light.

Faolan suddenly threw his hands to his eyes and choked.

Beudag cried out, seized his arm.

"I can see!" Faolan staggered, as if jolted. "I can see!" First he shouted it, then he whispered it. "*I can see.*"

Starke's eyes blurred. He whispered to Rann, tightly. "Make him see it, Rann or you die now. Make him see it!" to Faolan. "What do you see?"

Faolan was bewildered, he swayed. He put out his hands to shape the vision. "I—I see Crom Dhu. It's a good sight. I see the ships of Rann. Sinking!" He laughed a broken laugh. "I—see the fight beyond the gate!"

Silence swam in the room, over their heads.

Faolan's voice went alone, and hypnotized, into that silence.

He put out his big fists, shook them, opened them. "I see Mannt, and Aesur and Clev! Fighting as they always fought. I see Conan as he was. I see Beudag wielding steel again, on the shore! I see the enemy killed! I see men pouring out of the sea with brown skins and dark hair. Men I knew a long darkness ago. Men that roved the sea with me. *I see Rann captured!*" He began to sob with it, his lungs filling and releasing it, sucking in on it, blowing it out. Tears ran down from his vacant, blazing eyes. "I see Crom Dhu as it was and is and shall be! *I see, I see, I see!*"

Starke felt the chill on the back of his neck.

"I see Rann captured and held, and her men dead around her on the land before the Gate. I see the Gate thrown open—" Faolan halted. He looked at Starke. "Where are Clev and Mannt? Where is Bruce and Aesur?"

Starke let the fires burn on the hearths a long moment. Then he replied.

"They went back into the sea, Faolan."

Faolan's fingers fell emptily. "Yes," he said, heavily. "They had to go back, didn't they? They couldn't stay, could they? Not even for one night of food on the table, and wine in the mouth, and women in the deep warm furs before the hearth. Not even for one toast." He turned. "A drink, Romna. A drink for everyone."

Romna gave him a full cup. He dropped it, fell down to his knees, clawed at his breasts. "My heart!"

"Rann, you sea-devil!"

Starke held her instantly by the throat. He put pressure on the small raging pulses on either side of her snow-white neck. "Let him go, Rann!" More pressure. "*Let him go!*" Faolan grunted. Starke held her until her white face was dirty and strange with death.

It seemed like an hour later when he released her. She fell softly and did not move. She wouldn't move again.

Starke turned slowly to look at Faolan.

"You saw, didn't you, Faolan?" he said.

Faolan nodded blindly, weakly. He roused himself from the floor, groping. "I saw. For a moment, I saw everything. And Gods! but it made good seing! Here, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan, gave this other side of me something to lean on."

BEU DAG and Starke climbed the mountain above Falga the next day. Starke went ahead a little way, and with his coming the flame birds scattered, glittering away.

He dug the shallow grave and did what had to be done with the body he found there, and then when the grave was covered with thick grey stones he went back for Beudag. They stood together over it. He had never expected to stand over a part of himself, but here he was, and Beudag's hand gripped his.

He looked suddenly a million years old standing there. He thought of Earth and the Belt and Jupiter, of the joy streets in the Jekkara Low Canals of Mars. He thought of space and the ships going through it, and himself inside them. He thought of the million credits he had taken in that last job. He laughed ironically.

"Tomorrow, I'll have the sea creatures hunt for a little metal box full of credits." He nodded solemnly at the grave. "He wanted that. Or at least he thought. He killed himself getting it. So if the sea people find it, I'll send it up here to the mountain and bury it down under the rocks in his fingers. I guess that's the best place."

Beudag drew him away. They walked down the mountain toward Falga's harbor where a ship waited them. Walking, Starke lifted his face. Beudag was with him, and the sails of the ship were rising to take the wind, and the Red Sea waited for them to travel it. What lay on its far side was something for Beudag and Faolan-of-the-Ships and Romna and Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan to discover. He felt damned good about it. He walked on steadily, holding Beudag near.

And on the mountain, as the ship sailed, the flame birds soared down fitfully and frustratedly to beat at the stone mound; ceased, and mourning shrilly, flew away.



PUMPKIN EATER

By CARLTON SMITH

The space ship landed, and a pimply-faced kid got off and walked up to Ed Schule. Ed shook the kid's hand and smiled—and said to himself: "I got to kill this guy! Before he gets inside of me! Before he finds out what I am!"

THE second Ed Shule saw the slight, bespectacled youth who disembarked from the supply ship, a fist of doom smashed against his brain.

"It's him," he thought in that moment of horror. "Johnnie Lockwood. The only guy in the world who can send me to the electric chamber."

The monthly supply ship had landed an hour ago. The small crew of three had carried cases of goods, jars of water, and some new pumpkin vines into the store-rooms of this half of Space Station No. 1. The other half of the Space Station was two miles away, attached by a taut, thin cable.

Ten thousand two hundred sixty-five miles below, visibly turning on its axis, the misted planet Earth swam nakedly in the black sea of space.

Johnnie Lockwood wobbled across the landing platform toward Ed Shule. In these days when space-travel was in its very infancy, the space suit was still a cumbersome affair. Indeed, it was a miracle of astrogation whenever the supply ship arrived at the Station. No spaceship dared go farther than this. The Moon had not yet been reached.

There was gravity in the Station—or its equivalent, centrifugal force. The two halves of the Station swung about each other at their respective ends of the cable, producing an outward push which was equal to about one-fourth of an Earth gravity.

"I'm Johnnie Lockwood," said Johnnie Lockwood, thrusting forth a gauntleted hand, his bespectacled, studious face unsmiling. "I guess you're expecting me."

"I'm Ed Schule," said Ed, and he knew with a pang that the tremor of fright in

his voice had transmitted itself through the radio transmitter in his "aquarium"—glass helmet.

The newcomer didn't seem to notice. "That's fine, Ed," he said, almost before Ed had stopped talking. "I'd like to—uh—get out of this space suit."

Ed's big hand dropped limply to his side as Johnnie Lockwood released it. He pointed at the gaping hole in the air-lock, into which two men from the ship were carrying the last of the supplies. "Don't blame you for wanting to get out of it, Johnnie," he said, through a dry throat. "You can go in with them."

Johnnie nodded thankfully, and was gone. The airlock door went slowly shut.

Ed Schule stood with his big body facing toward the closed airlock. His stomach was churning. Whether Johnnie Lockwood recognized him or not he didn't know. The kid looked like a pimply undergraduate, but even at that he might have the sense to look underneath Ed's van Dyke and graying hair and see the man who had committed murder. And having sense enough for that, he'd have sense enough to keep his recognition off his face. Still, ten years had passed, and maybe he'd forgotten.

"What's the matter with you, Ed? You're white as a sheet."

Ed spun around. Then forced himself to relax.

"Nothin's the matter," he told the captain of the supply ship. He forced a slow, twisted smile. "Something I ate maybe."

The other looked at him curiously, shrugged. He pushed out a receipt book and Ed scrawled off his signature in pencil. He couldn't have made a readable



Illustration by DOOLIN

signature to save his life, not in his sudden condition of nerves.

"Who is that kid, anyway?" the captain asked suddenly. "You know him?"

"Who, me?" Ed shook his head, anxious for the ship to leave. "Never saw him before in my life. He's one of the Rhine Foundation's prize pupils. Mind reader. Telesthesia expert. The Foundation is leasing the other half of the Station for some experimental work."

"Oh. Yeah, the kid was saying something about that."

A FEW minutes later, Ed watched the tiny ship blast off. He took a deep breath and set his teeth together. They were alone now. And this was something he had to face. But what if the kid did know who he was? What then? A black, completely uninhibited emotion took root in his mind and his grey eyes darkened with savagery. It was a helluva note for a man to build up a completely new, soft life for himself and then to have it torn away by a whim of fate. For this life *was* soft. Six months in space, as master of the Station, and then a month of complete freedom on Earth, with all the money he needed. Give that up? Run for it, before the kid could notify the proper authorities? Like hell he would.

He went inside the Station, the airlock whining shut behind him. He prowled down the corridor, a big hulking ape of a man with sloping shoulders that merged into the back of his head. He was master here. The whole world lay at his feet. For the rest of his life, he wouldn't have to be afraid. Because they didn't know who he was, and they never would know, even if he had to kill again.

The three years following the murder, he had worked, hard. He had studied, adding to his already masterful knowledge of most phases of science. Meteorology, celestial mechanics, rocketry, agriculture, navigation, astrogation. When the Goddard Foundation announced they were looking for a man with the qualifications to handle the Station, he had been ready. That was what he was working for. His application form put him out in front of the other applicants. He had been chosen almost immediately; seven years ago.

Space Station No. 1—the only such sta-

tion yet built—was Ed Schule's hideout. He scowled darkly. It would continue to be. . . .

Johnnie rose quickly from the easy chair in the lounge as Ed came into the room, minus his space suit. The younger man was blond, with rusty billowing hair, and a surprisingly handsome, good-humored face. His glasses, shielding intense blue eyes, gave the impression of fanatical studiousness. The impression was partially shattered by his slow smile.

He made some remark about making himself at home, then stopped in mid-sentence, blinking.

"What's the matter?" said Ed, his face hardening suddenly.

"Nothing! That is, you looked like somebody I might have known at some time. Ever been in South Hills?—North Carolina?"

"Never," said Ed, watching with gimlet intenseness to see how the kid would take that.

Johnnie Lockwood nodded. "My mistake," he said ruefully. He studied Ed closely again, frowning, then sighed. "Yeah, I guess so. I've hardly even been out of South Hills and I thought I might have seen you there some place. This is my first trip out from Earth, too!" he blurted unexpectedly.

He looked around him, eerily.

"You get used to it," said Ed, after an iron silence. "Isn't any different from Earth, except there's only one-fourth the gravity. Which doesn't make any real difference. Gravity, or the lack of it, doesn't keep you from eating, walking, sleeping or following any of the normal functions of life. Speaking of eating, come on along to the galley. We'll have to rustle our own."

Johnnie took out his watch uneasily. "I'm due to call my first deck of cards in an hour and a half, so I guess we better make sure to get over to my half of the station on time."

"Sure. But we'll have plenty of time."

The cable car took off, with a huff and puff of combusting gasoline and alcohol, forty-five minutes later. The cable went straight "up" from the center of the landing platform, giving the impression of a Hindu fakir's magic, self-sustaining rope. A humming, vibrating, sliding sound trans-

mitted itself through the space suits of the two men in the open cabin.

As the car slowed from its initial momentum, Ed Schule twisted the handle and gave her another shot. Johnnie Lockwood was pressed down against his seat. He kept on looking from side to side, eyes wide on the pendant, powdering stars.

"This scare you?" said Ed, looking sideways.

The kid forced a smile. "I guess it does. This emptiness. It was a little different in the space ship."

"Yeah. But I'm the one that should be scared."

"Yes? How so?"

"Your work. Clairvoyance, isn't it? Mind reading?"

Johnnie laughed softly, a trifle patronizingly. "Not at all. Mind reading is telepathy. This hasn't got anything to do with telepathy. As a matter of fact, telepathy never has been proved. Might just be the same as telesthesia."

"Telesthesia is clairvoyance, isn't it?"

"Right. Dr. Rhine didn't like the word clairvoyance, though, since most people connect spiritualism with it. There's nothing supernatural there, however." He was talking with the ease of one who is familiar with his subject, and intensely interested in it. "Telesthesia is simply extra-sensory perception. What extra senses are involved, or how they work, nobody knows yet. But it's been proved, scientifically."

ED nodded and took his hand away from the rocket control. The car had gone past the cable's midpoint and was now falling toward the other half of the Station.

Although they were not yet "heavy," due to their distance from the end of the swinging cable, Ed showed Johnnie Lockwood how to swing his chair around so he'd be sitting upright again, instead of with his head hanging down.

After awhile Ed said, keeping his voice casual with an iron control, "You don't read minds at all, eh?"

"Read minds?" Johnnie laughed again. The laughter sounded forced. "Hardly, Mr. Schule. The virtue of Dr. Rhine's proof of telesthesia lay in the fact that he used one experiment, over and over again, in an infinite variety of scientifically con-

trolled conditions. Those of us who have followed after him hew to the line. We use ESP cards exclusively."

His almost white-blond brows came down a trifle as he saw the way Ed Schule was looking at him. He added hastily, as if Ed had caught him in a small falsehood, "Oh, there *have* been isolated experiments in pure mind-reading, but I've never indulged in any myself. Why?" he asked with sudden curiosity. "You're interested in mind-reading, Mr. Schule?"

Ed shoved in the decelerators. The car slowed with a terrific jerk.

"No," Ed said with uncontrollable harshness. "No. Not at all."

Johnnie stared at him through frowning eyes. Ed could feel the stare. Then Johnnie shrugged his shoulders, and glanced down over his shoulder at the approaching other half of the Station.

A spasm of thoughts shook Ed's brain. *He's lying! He reads minds. The rat is reading my mind right now. . . . No, wait a minute, Ed, you damn fool. Don't go off half-cocked. Your imagination is getting you!*

Both halves of the Station were shaped like spheres, fifty feet in diameter. The landing platform was on the cable side, perpendicular to the cable, and was a flat, circular shelf which did not quite eclipse the outlines of the sphere to which it was attached. The cable car slid to a smooth stop.

Inside the ship, they stepped out of their space suits with a good deal of puffing, and Ed said, as he lifted the glass helmet off his head, scraping his pointed, bristly van Dyke, "I've fixed the ship up according to instructions. You won't have any communication with the outside—either with Earth or me. Except for the ESP punch-board, of course. And you realize you won't be able to get out of this ship until I unlock it a week from now?"

The thoughts that last statement evoked in his mind must have showed on his face. Johnnie Lockwood was staring at him. Ed swung away and said quietly, "I'll show you through the ship."

He took the kid to the galley, the food-cupboards; showed him the waste-condenser, explained the system of pipes which conducted air and waste water along the outside of the ship where the precious

water was condensed by the cold, and later on purified for re-use. This ship was entirely self-sufficient. Two quarts of water was all there was on board. It was all that was necessary. It could be used over and over again, for months. Of course, some of it slowly escaped into space as the airlock door was opened and closed.

Johnnie nodded, lighted a cigarette, and then in alarm started to snuff it out. Ed stopped him. There was plenty of air, he assured Johnnie.

"The pumpkins," he explained.

"Pumpkins!"

"I'll show you."

Ed showed him the "farm" in the center of the ship. It was a deep box of earth about ten feet square. It trailed with a profusion of pumpkin vines, and there were several pumpkins lying in orange, unexpected splendor amongst that greenery. Johnnie Lockwood's eyes grew big, but he got the idea at once.

"The air purifier!"

"Right. Plant physiologists showed that about eleven square feet of the leaf surface of a growing pumpkin provide enough oxygen for a resting person. There's about forty square feet there, I figure. The leaves absorb the carbon dioxide in the ship and breathe out oxygen. And they'll keep on doing it as long as they stay alive. Well, that's about all. I'll take you down to the 'sending' room and let you go ahead with your experiment."

ED walked in front of Johnnie. He was conscious of a burning spot directly on the back of his head. It pressed in like a needle. He knew he was imagining things. He was imagining that Johnnie Lockwood's thoughts were boring through that burning spot into his brain, reading his mind. *God, he thought, this will drive me crazy. He can't fool me. He knows who I am. And he knows that I know who he is. . . .* But maybe I'm wrong. Well, I don't have to worry, not for awhile. Not for a week at least. He can't get in touch with anybody on Earth, with the radio taken out of the ship. And he won't be able to get out of the ship until I let him out next week.

He led the kid into a small room next to the galley. It was bare except for a chair which was bolted down in front of a slant-

ing board. On the board was the ESP punch-board. Beneath was a simple radio-signal sounding mechanism.

In response to his instructions two months ago, when the supply ship brought the equipment, Ed had installed that board himself. Furthermore, he had taken the regular radio communication apparatus entirely out of this half of the Station, had closed off the star-ports by welding disks of steel over the outside, had rearranged the dogs on the airlocks so they could be opened from the outside only by him.

Once Ed left the ship, Johnnie Lockwood would have communication with no one in the wide universe except himself. The experiment was such that that was necessary. There must be no possible means of Johnnie's knowing the order of a deck of cards back on Earth through any means other than his own mental powers.

On Earth, they used locked rooms, sound-proofed. Out in space the experiment was the same, except that it was on a vastly greater magnitude.

"Swell!" Johnnie Lockwood said enthusiastically, his eyes shining as he slid into the metal chair. He looked up. "Know how this works, Mr. Schule?"

"Not exactly."

"It's simple. The only human being involved in the whole procedure is myself. The principle purpose of the Rhine Foundation is to find out how telesthesia works from space. Whether there's any time-lag because of the distance. Whether the Heavyside-Kinelly Layer—the same layer that reflects long radio waves back to Earth—might have any effect on my telesthesiac powers. Whether clouds interfere or help. Whether the turning of the Earth under the Station, making the distance first greater and then shorter, improves or harms the sending. And all this is mighty important, Mr. Schule. Someday, when interplanetary travel starts, it might be a lot more efficient to use telesthesiacs on space ships in place of radios. . . . But—golly—that's a long way in the future!"

Ed stood above him, digesting the flow of words mechanically but with another part of his mind caught in the tortuous trap of indecision. Acting? Was the kid acting? Maybe he wasn't. But what if he was?

Johnnie Lockwood pointed to the punch-

board. Each of the five buttons was impressed with a symbol on top.

"There are five of each of those symbols—waves, circle, plus sign, star, square," Johnnie said, brushing back his crest of hair with a quick motion. "The deck of cards is made up of twenty-five cards—five of each of the symbols in a deck. Four times a day, at exact intervals, that deck of cards is thoroughly shuffled by a mechanical shuffler back at the Rhine Foundation on Earth—that's near South Hills. Exactly a minute after the shuffling, I am permitted to begin punching these buttons. I punch a star and it's automatically recorded on a machine back at the Foundation as the radio signal is picked up. I punch a square—and so forth, through twenty-five calls.

"After calling each deck of cards, the machine automatically lights up, showing the observer down there the actual order of the cards and the order I called them in. The average is recorded. I do that four times a day." He leaned back, grinning, "Soft life."

Ed slowly nodded. "You ever call twenty-five cards right in a row?"

"Back on Earth? Plenty of times." Johnnie laughed ruefully. "But there are some days when I fall all to pieces, and don't even average a normal five cards out of the whole deck. And sometimes I'm likely to miss them altogether."

He looked at his watch. "Gosh! I'm due to begin calling in twelve minutes!"

Ed took his cue. "I'll get out," he said hastily, "soon as I plant a new pumpkin vine up on the farm."

He started away quickly, but he stopped as he heard Johnnie's chair squeal around.

Ed turned quickly. "What's the matter?" he said with sudden harshness. Johnnie Lockwood was looking at him with two tiny frown-lines gathered between his wide-spaced eyes.

"**N**OTHING, I guess," Johnnie said slowly. "Only, when you moved fast like that, with your head turned at that angle, it made me think of somebody I—"

All at once his smile was sheepish. "Aw, shoot, Mr. Schule, I guess I'm wrong. Space does funny things to your imagination, I suppose."

"I'll see you next week," Ed Schule blurted and left the room, his face sick and white. Quickly, he went up to the farm, planted the new pumpkin shoots, and took out a ripe, matured pumpkin and its vine. A growing pumpkin provided more oxygen.

He left the ripe pumpkin in the galley, got into his space suit and quickly left the Station. He dogged the airlock shut, leaned on it, breathing hard and sick to his stomach.

He would have to do it again.

Ed Schule got into the cable car, and all the way back to his half of the Station, his grey eyes wore a strange, glassy, terrified expression.

He didn't want to kill Johnnie Lockwood. But he hadn't wanted to kill the old man, either, back there in South Hills, North Carolina, ten years ago. Not until the old fool had forced him into it with his stubbornness, his refusal to pay Ed the customary two thousand dollars.

Ed could close his eyes and see the whole miserable spectacle again. The first year as a pharmaceutical salesman—Ed had previously been a research chemist for a big corporation until the corporation refused to give him royalties on certain big inventions—had been a model of honest behavior. He knew his goods. From one end of the country to the other, he gained a string of customers who were almost willing to buy from him on his recommendation alone. Drug store stuff. But there hadn't been any money in it; not the big money he wanted. So, having worked up his trade, he substituted common prescription drugs with other drugs which caused dangerous reactions. Later on, he would show up at the respective druggists, explaining his mistake with appropriate horror. As was usually the case, the druggist in question had already filled numerous prescriptions with the dangerous drug, was already aware of the violent illnesses some of his customers had endured, and rather than let it be known that he had executed such an irresponsible blunder, would pay Ed the two thousand dollars hush money that he demanded.

Ed groaned to himself as the cable-car climbed past the midway point. Sucker, he thought to himself. After the first fifteen takes, he should have been contented, and got into some business that was more to

his liking. No. He had to keep on. And then in South Hills—

The feeling of helpless savagery came back to him as he thought of South Hills. The old small-town druggist who had more honor than sense. Refusing to pay. Reaching for the phone, intending to call the police. And that would have meant that the rest of the scheme would have come to life. The phone, falling to the floor . . . the incredulous choking squawk from the old man's throat . . . the limp body . . . the quick, clueless preparation for the getaway.

And then Johnnie Lockwood. Standing there in the doorway as he walked out. Johnnie, ten years younger then, with the same intense eyes, the same shock of blond hair, staring after him as he brushed past. Johnnie, the delivery boy, who had found the body a few moments later, so the papers blazoned. Johnnie, who described the murderer. . . .

The memories of the past, the indecision of the present, the possible horrors of the future, put Ed Schule in the worst state of nerves he had ever endured. He grounded the cable car, entered the Station, tore off his space suit, and for hours walked in a frenzy through the small rooms and narrow corridors, picking at his nails, his broad face tense, tortured.

That other murder had been careless, a spur-of-the-moment act. True, later on he had completely grown a new identity, had built a new life, but he had always known that a Damoclesian sword—Johnnie Lockwood—was hanging over him; that was the reason he had sought this job out here in space, a reason that had backfired now, he saw. But if he killed Johnnie Lockwood, and his mind retched at the word, it would have to be done in such a manner that no suspicion would ever attach to him. No possible suspicion.

A locked room murder?

THE first few days of that week, Ed Schule walked around in a daze. It wasn't the decision to kill that made him feel that way. No. He had already made a clean-cut decision on that subject, so clean-cut that when he made it he had felt as if the oppressiveness of his fear these last ten years had taken wings and flown away, forever. It was the method of kill-

ing, the perfect method, that occupied his thoughts. How? Good God, how? The week was slipping past! He had to act, had to have a plan in mind when he opened the door of Johnnie Lockwood's half of the Station, before he could report to the authorities.

He hardly had the mind to attend to his routine meteorological duties. But he forced himself to it, sending messages to the World Weathercasting Station on Earth, describing and giving the location of cloud masses, storm centers, mass-wind shifts, and their directions; giving sun-spot information; calculating aurora-borealis intensities.

The daily duty done, he went countless hours without food. He barely remembered to water the "farm." His mind was busy as he did the job, on the last day before he was supposed to see how Johnnie Lockwood was getting along. But his mind was not too busy to notice something wrong about the pumpkin patch, in which he had planted a new pumpkin vine a few days ago.

His eyes widened, and he dropped to his knees beside the plot of ground with a cry of horror.

The pumpkin plant he had planted earlier that week was withering, its leaves yellowing, drooping—dying!

He went into a frenzy of action. He ripped the dying plant out by the roots and, trembling, went over the whole patch, examining every stem, leaf and petiole. He relaxed at last, and his handkerchief, when he drew it away from his face, was sopping wet.

He got to his feet unsteadily. If the whole patch had been infected—

His eyes fell on the uprooted plant, with its small yellow bulbs. A bell was ringing in his brain, a bell that tolled out one message. He grabbed up the plant, turning it over and over in his chunky hands, his trained agrarian eyes seeing the signs.

Bacterial wilt. *Erwinia tracheiphila*. The most deadly, virulent, fastest-working pumpkin blight there was.

Ed Schule went below, holding the plant as if it were a precious treasure. His tongue licked his lips, nervously, continuously, while his mind traveled along an inescapable trail.

Bacterial wilt. How? But the answer

was there. The supply ship had brought some small pumpkin vines. They were infected. But whose fault? Not Ed's. It would be impossible for those plants to become infected up here. The cargo inspector had overlooked it, then. Blame him.

Ed sat down, beginning to stare at the dying plant with glistening eyes. When Johnnie Lockwood was found dead, the cargo inspector would take the blame!

Ed Schule would be in the clear, and the menace would be gone!

Ed undogged the outer door of the airlock, closed it behind him, then opened the inner door, leaving it open. He went into the Station, treading slowly. There was no sound. He went into the punch-board room, looking at the punch-board with pale eyes. The room was empty. He went through the galley, through the lavatory, then stepped slowly into the bed room.

There was a dim light in the corner. He saw Johnnie Lockwood stretched out on the bed, fully dressed, eyes closed, chest slowly rising and falling. Asleep. Ed's lips tightened with satisfaction. He started to fade out of the room, and thought he heard the tiniest crackling of springs from the bed.

He turned swiftly. His face grew brutal as he stared at Johnnie.

There was no movement, and he decided he was wrong. He left, went quickly up to the farm. He was still in his cumbersome space suit, helmet thrown back. He kneeled in front of the pumpkin patch, and it was as he suspected. The shoot he had placed here last week was infested, too, but not as badly or as obviously as the other.

He kneeled there, thinking it out. Bacterial disease grew with amazing swiftness out here in space, partly because of the low gravity, partly because of the purposely high carbon dioxide content of the air. In another week, the infection would spread through the whole pumpkin patch. The trick was to accelerate the spread of the disease.

Carefully he punctured a petiole of the infected plant. A thick, unhealthy milk oozed out. Ed scooped the milk onto his finger, worked over each of the other vines at various spots. He bruised the soft underside of the plants, applied the thick,

diseased liquid to the wounds. He got heavily to his feet.

A good job, well done, and impossible to undo. The plants had received their death-sentences.

HE turned with a sigh of satisfaction—and at the top of the stair which led up to the farm saw Johnnie Lockwood.

The sudden, unheralded sight of the younger man was as much a shock to Ed's brain as when he had first stepped from the supply ship. But it was that same shock which goaded his mind into furious, pin-wheel activity.

"Hello!" he uttered with surprise, shining his sudden smile through the aquarium. "You gave me a helluva start, standing there." He swore roundly. "Well, how about it? Ready to take off a couple of days and take it easy over at my shack? We can play rummy and I've got an old bottle that'll give you a new kind of a jag."

He laughed jovially, picked up his gauntlets, and walked casually toward Johnnie, his purpose hidden behind his smiling eyes. But Johnnie's expression was hard, uncompromising, and Ed felt another shock as he saw the long thin, hairy arms turn into clubs as the fists knotted. Johnnie said in a voice as cold and brittle as sheet steel



Johnnie Lockwood

exposed to space on the sunless side of the Station, "I know you now. Not your name. Nobody knew that. But I know you!"

Ed stopped. His eyebrows curled up and his lips curled down.

"You knew who I was all along," he stated in a throaty whisper. "That's too bad."

"I knew it fifteen minutes ago when you woke me up! That look on your face when you turned around. The same look you had ten years ago just after you finished killing old Walton! I knew it in a minute!"

His eyes were frosty-hard. They switched suddenly, looked past Ed at the pumpkin patch.

"You did something to the pumpkin patch. What?"

He was in motion suddenly, his jaw out. He started to walk past Ed, but Ed brought his space-suited arm around with considerable force and Johnnie Lockwood went spinning back, brought up short against the stair railing. Ed followed after him, mouth cavernous in an unuttered roar, hands extended. He caught Johnnie in a bear hug, bent him back and back. Johnnie's fists flayed against his helmet, his knees tried to gouge the big figure through the space-suit. He panted, shrilly, asthmatically. He broke loose with a wheezy gasp, spun away, tossed his head to get hair out of his eyes.

Ed yelled like a fiend, kicked out with his booted leg. It caught Johnnie in the chest. Johnnie clawed wildly for something to hold onto, and fell backward down the stairs.

He moved as in slow motion. The gravity was "shallow." Ed found himself in a stooping position, hands on his knees, holding his breath, ready to leap down the stairs at him. But Johnnie's head struck the edge of the stair railing at the bottom and even before he hit the floor his blond hair was stained with bright blood.

He groaned and rolled and was utterly still.

Ed came down the stairs, hunching down, tearing rasps coming from his throat, half fear, half berserk rage. He stood over the fallen figure. He felt a tremendous gratitude when he saw the rising and falling chest. Just unconscious. In a few hours he'd come to. It would be better if he

came to, because he had to die as Ed planned for him—of asphyxiation.

Ed left Johnnie where he lay, and went through the Station, nostrils distended, face brutal with his savage purpose. This must be perfect. No clues. Clues? Well, Johnnie would come to in a few hours. What could he do? Realize that the pumpkin patch had been tampered with, that shortly there would be no air to breathe? Yes. And he'd know he was going to die. He'd try to escape first. No use. There was no space suit here for him, for a space suit carried a built-in radio headset, and Johnnie, according to the conditions of the experiment, must have no possible means of contact with the outside universe.

He couldn't escape, even if he managed to break through the confining walls of the ship.

Well, he'd write a letter, leave some sort of sign that his was not a death due to the carelessness of the cargo inspector, but was a premeditated murder. Easy to overcome that. In three or four days, Ed would come back, destroy any letters or other signs that the twisted, purpled body had left. Then he'd dog the ports shut, and come back at the scheduled time. He'd be completely surprised about the death of Johnnie Lockwood—at least over the radio when he reported the terrible accident.

He paused in the punch-board room. He sneered at it. A child's instrument. It talked only to a machine, and then only in terms of stars, squares, plus signs, waves, and circles. And its mechanism was such that it couldn't possibly be converted into a dot-dot-dash transmitter.

Ed left the Station, dogged the airlock shut again, and with clearing brow, with a thrumming relief that affected him like strong drink, sent the cable car driving upward.

ED was intoxicated with more than relief when the supply ship showed up two days later—far ahead of schedule. He was staggering tight. Yet when the gong rang through the Station, signaling the landing of the ship, his brain cleared as if a shocking, overdose of oxygen had been pumped through it.

The supply ship! Good God! What was it doing here?

He started to shake. It couldn't be. He

pressed his face savagely against a starport, saw the small, blunt-nosed vehicle. A terrific anxiety ate into him like acid. Think, he told himself, think, damn you! What's gone wrong? Why are they here?

The utter helplessness of his position struck at him like a blow. Johnnie wasn't dead yet, couldn't be dead. Maybe in a few more hours, yes. His mind swept like a hurricane into a wheatfield of calculations, figures. Maybe two, maybe three more hours and Johnnie would be dead. The answer, the only answer to this predicament, was captured, held rigid in his mind. He went to the airlock, worked the valves.

Moments later, the captain of the supply ship—Lannery—and two other men Ed didn't recognize came into the Station. Ed fumbled over the airlock without taking time for introductions. He seemed to be having so much trouble with the airlock that Lannery stared at him curiously, shoved him out of the way, and got it shut without any trouble.

The three men threw back their aquariums, and Lannery, plainly uneasy, said, "Ed, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Jacobs. Gentlemen, this is Mr. Schule, Station master."

Jacobs spoke with an urgent courtesy. "Mr. Schule, I don't believe we'd better waste any time. Mr. Johnson and I are with the Floydon Detective Agency, but our special purpose is to give protection to the Rhine Foundation and its personnel. The plain fact of the matter is that we believe John Lockwood is in some sort of trouble. We'd better get over there now."

He started to buckle down his helmet again, and motioned his two companions to do the same.

"But—" said Ed, making his expression one of bland surprise.

Lannery interrupted worriedly. "Better get into your space suit, Ed," he advised. "We can talk over the objections on the way there. I guess we'd better use the cable car, gentlemen."

Ed went to the lazaret. He took so long getting into his space suit that Lannery came after him.

Ed glanced sidewise at Jacobs as the cable car ascended. "I started to say I don't see how—"

"We realize that, Mr. Schule. None of

us sees how the kid could have got into trouble. But down at the Rhine Foundation they insist he is in trouble—maybe something serious. Aren't we going rather slow?"

Ed shot more power into the jets, but his little finger pressed upward on the gasoline release button. From the rear of the car, something exploded. Ed swore blackly. The car stopped and started to fall back and Ed jammed in the brake. Laboriously, he turned, stuck his head over the edge of the car and looked down at the jets.

"I guess the jets are fused," his muffled voice came.

Jacobs' face held irritation. He said sharply, "Can't you fix it?"

"I'll take a look." He leaned far over, and for minutes pried at the closed jets with a screw-driver from his kit.

"Of all the stupid, idiotic—" Johnson began but Jacobs silenced him.

Lannery said lamely, "I suppose he threw too much gasoline into the fuel conduit."

Jacobs said with controlled anger, "Mr. Schule, let that go. We'll drop the car back to the platform and go over in the ship."

Ed managed to get the brake stuck. Sweat rolled in great drops down his face as he lifted a panel in the bottom of the cabin and pulled the wrong way on the brake-grip.

He was conscious of Lannery watching him with a worried frown. Finally Lannery shoved him out of the way and easily released the brake.

Twenty minutes later, the car inched to a landing and Ed was forced to run with the other man toward the ship. He managed to stumble once, but that was as long as he could delay again. The ship took off and a few moments later landed on the other half of the Station.

Ed was sick to his stomach. Jacobs, his grey eyes alight with a strange glitter, waved Ed ahead. When Ed fumbled with the dogs, Jacobs cursed lividly, and with mighty twisting motions got the lock open. He literally pushed Ed ahead into the ship, and Ed went in, his mouth open and panting, fiery saws moving back and forth across his nerves, his eyes wide and bulging with a terror the other men couldn't

see. It had been more than an hour since they had come. Maybe Johnnie Lockwood was dead! He had to be dead! Furthermore, it was impossible that he had signaled the Foundation. That punch-board? No! The punch-board communicated only with a machine. Mind-reading then—thought sending—

He stepped into the ship, hoping that he would see Johnnie's asphyxiated body—and something that was animalistic and snarling leaped on him. Ed felt a crushing blow where his space-suit touched his neck. He sank into a profound, swimming abyss.

IT was over, and Ed Schule knew it was over. Lannery and Johnson were holding his groggy body erect and Johnnie Lockwood was sitting weakly on the lounge couch, breathing gaspingly of the oxygen that Jacobs was squirting into his face from his tank.

"Another half hour," Johnnie gasped. "Golly, maybe another few minutes! I had just enough strength to jump him. I didn't think the Foundation would ever

understand what I was trying to tell them—"

"You couldn't have told the Foundation anything," Ed suddenly shouted, eyes blazing. He swore as he struggled against the grip of the two men, looking at Johnnie with hatred.

Johnnie breathed hard from the tank. He met Ed's glance calmly.

"No," he admitted. "I couldn't tell them about the pumpkin patch, how you killed it. Or how you killed old man Walton. I was limited. I only had waves and circles and squares and stars and plus signs to work with—somehow I had to get the idea across."

"You couldn't have," Ed panted. "Not with that damned punch-board!"

Johnnie said gently, "Sorry, I did. Star, circle, square—plus! Star, circle, Square—Over and over again. Down on Earth, the board lighted up with that message four times a day. Figure it out."

Ed figured it out, with the same resort to logic which had made Johnnie's murder almost sure-fire.

S O S—hurry. . . .

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of PLANET STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October, 1945.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared T. T. Scott, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the PLANET STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Chester Whitehorn, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; and also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

T. T. SCOTT,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of September, 1945.

W. B. BULLOCH,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires Feb. 11, 1947.)

Space-Lane of No-Return

By **GEORGE A. WHITTINGTON**

You were bored—keeping the endless, dull space-lanes clear. You wanted excitement, danger, to see the weird planets of the System. You wanted—And then it happened, all the swift, blazing danger of the void—and you found yourself being blasted out of existence.



"A STEROID FISHING" was no job for men who joined the Inter-Planetary Patrol with the lure of distant space frontiers in their heart,

Nord Holber told himself bitterly.

Your two-man Patrol ship hung less than twenty degrees off the ecliptic, with sharp, hard starlight from the spangled

jet mantle of spacc glinting against the top and sides of its maroon plastic hull. Below, the asteroids rushed through their mad orbits like the vengeful ghosts of shattered planets and satellites.

Smaller fragments danced through weird paths above the main body. They were the hazard that forced space liners to arc far above the impassable Belt on the run between Jupiter's moons and the inner planets: and, since you were a fledgeling Patrol Officer, fresh from Federation University, you wasted the energy that boiled in your blood hunting these fragments, yanking them out of space!

"It's fun," Mike Doren admitted, as though reading his partner's thought. "Like shark fishing. But it's not what I joined the Patrol to do."

Nord Holber's answering smile softened the strength a firm chin and thin, straight nose gave to his long oval face. "More like mine sweeping in ancient times, Mike," he said quietly—as though the dispassionate menace of the inanimate chunks of matter they hunted could answer the call for high adventure! "One of those things could make a wreck of this ship—as easily as it could a liner."

Against that possibility, they wore space suits, and, under his transparent helmet, Nord's grey eyes swept the side view screens for any fragments they'd missed on the way down. Mike was at the drive controls, his gaze one the lower screen, watching their prey, an ugly, angular mass, hardly larger than a man's head, two hundred feet below.

"O.K.," Mike said, his big mouth curving in a wry smile. "Let go with the hook."

Nord pressed two control studs before him. Their ship was standard except for the little bay that now opened aft, the heavy electro-magnet that shot downward under tiny automatic jets, and the power-driven winch that paid out flexible, heavily insulated cable to hold the magnet captive and carry the current.

"Sunspot!" Nord said, as the magnet struck the little asteroid fragment squarely and clung.

"There's always enough para-magnetic stuff in them," his partner commented bitterly. "That's what makes this blasted assignment possible!" His blue eyes bright-

ened. "That's one more toward a full cargo—a trip back to Mar's Base, and some planet leave. Hope I don't dream about these dirty rocks!" The brightness hardened in his eyes, as they dropped to the Asteroid Belt below.

"I'll start hunting another one," Nord said wearily. "You haul this one in!" He took Mike's chair before the drive controls, and his long fingers made deft, swift adjustments. Their little ship nosed upward toward a safer cruising area.

The other jabbed the winch control studs. The winch began to turn again, drawing the cable taut. Their ship lurched momentarily, as the cable tugged against the orbital inertia of the little mass at the end of the magnet; but winch and ship were built for the struggle, and the asteroid fragment swung from its course, starting upward on the magnet.

NOW Mike stores it away in the outer hull with the rest, Nord thought glumly, and the whole weary routine starts over again. Three days it took to find this last one—three days of monotonous search just above the Belt!

He forced his slim, wiry body erect, and straightened his shoulders. "They're getting scarier, Mike. Before long, the System Federation can lower the safe traffic lanes down to here—that's the closest to the Belt that'll ever be practical. Maybe the next batch of Patrol College grads will get a different initiation."

"Sure," grumbled Mike, watching the ascending magnet. "Maybe the Federation'll have the Patrol go all out after that pirate, Kadine. He's got the only ship in space that can navigate the Asteroid Belt! Get his secret—and liners can go right through the Belt without bothering about asteroids or fragments!"

"If they'd tried that before, Nord, we wouldn't waste our Patrol career with this blasted 'asteroid fishing'."

"The secret's in the steel hull of his ship," Holber agreed, firm jaw tightening. Dhain Kadine, he remembered, had been a brilliant physicist before he turned to space piracy. Now his ship, the only steel-hulled vessel in an age of plastics, operated from a base deep within the Asteroid Belt itself—sailing untouched where other daring craft had been battered to wreckage!

"We can't go in after him," Nord added, and he picks his own time and place to come out. But—"

The visaphone on the instrument panel before him jangled a sudden warning. His grey eyes widened. A glowing disk indicated general communications wavelength, but the jangling meant a rider that stamped the communication; *urgent!*

He snapped the instrument on, and tuned in the length. The screen glowed, and blurred, vague images appeared. Broken, unintelligible words poured out.

Mike Doren glared at the instrument savagely, and glanced quickly to the lower view screen. The asteroid fragment was still a few feet below. "Static from the cable," he growled. "Wait! We don't want to lose this thing."

"That's a Patrol Officer on the screen," Holber said doubtfully, and smiled. "But I can't make out enough to tell his rank, so it's not insubordination if we wait."

The current flowing through the cable to the magnet was the same high frequency used in the ship itself—there was no space in a compact Patrol vessel for unnecessary converters. But, inside, the current was screened against interference with visaphone reception; while outside, pulsing through the cable, it set up an interference field.

In a matter of seconds, the magnet and its captive were inside the hull, and the bay doors closed. Mike jabbed off the magnetizing current, and the two heard the heartening thump of the asteroid fragment against the outer hull.

They heard, too, the voice from the visaphone, suddenly clear and imperative against the still jangling alarm: "... Kadine. Repeating: ..."

Mike's jaw dropped. "Ring of Saturn! Talk about the devil!"

On the visaphone screen was a Colonel of the Inter-Planetary Patrol. Behind him could be seen a spacious control room—the nerve center of a luxury space liner. The Colonel's square, rugged face was white with anger. His words were clipped.

"Repeating! All Patrol ships in vicinity of Space Lane 6, be on lookout for Dhain Kadine, who has halted and robbed Earth Liner, *Jovian Nymph!*"

The words swept the weariness from

Nord's face, and brought flame leaping from the depths of his grey eyes! Space Lane 6 was almost directly above their position. He saw Mike's features light with eagerness. Dhain Kadine had struck out from the wild Belt that was his impregnable stronghold; and now Nord Holber and Mike Doren, hugging the upper fringe of the Belt, were between the outlaw and safety!

"It's our chance!" Mike shouted. "Promotion—the end of this rookie fishing business—if we get him! We—"

IN the visaphone, the Colonel went on, his voice bitter with chagrin; "Valuable scientific documents have been taken under threat of destruction to an unarmed passenger ship.

"Kadine traveling in direction of the Eos Family. Imperative that the Patrol intercept and destroy Dhain Kadine!" He paused, and added grimly; "*Jovian Nymph* standing by."

Mike Doren whistled. "Must be some important papers! Why weren't they sent by Patrol ship then?"

Nord's eyes were speculative. "The Patrol's busy off Jupiter's moons. There's trouble brewing with the underground Jovian League trying to agitate the moons out of the System Federation. It's ticklish business, Mike—dynamite, in fact, with the System Congress expecting violence!

"Kadine's supposed to be in that business up to his ears, so somebody thought he'd be too busy to intercept a liner."

The other nodded. "So they send a Patrol Officer with the papers on a regular liner—and Jovian League spies tip off Kadine to come back from Jupiter and intercept them over the Belt, where he can jump to safety into the Asteroids!"

Nord was already searching the view screens. "Better get below and stow that fragment away, Mike," he ordered, quietly, asserting his nominal command for the first time since the two started their initial assignment. "And check pressure in your suit oxygen tank. The Eos Family is right below us in the Belt—and this is where Kadine's heading!"

His partner grinned. "Yes, sir!" He clambered through the inner airlock, and squirmed through the narrow space between the hulls. His voice came back over

the suit communication unit: "Aren't you going to acknowledge the orders?"

"That would warn Kadine," Holber told him.

His lips curved in a tight smile that did not soften the long oval of his face. "The Colonel knows we've begun fishing this section of the Belt—but Kadine may have been too busy over by Jupiter's moons to keep track of little details like that."

Doren came back into the cabin. "Doubt if the Jovian League spies keep track of routine assignments of rookie Patrol Officers," he agreed. "What's our move?"

"We wait." Nord's grey eyes flicked over the top and rear view screens. "Kadine should come from above and behind. We'll let him overtake us. That way we'll stay between him and the Belt, and make him fight!"

"He won't get by this heat ray!" Mike promised savagely.

His big hands went over the ray tube controls experimentally, and he grinned as he swung the sights across the rear sector. "I'm sick of playing with asteroid fragments!"

Holber didn't move his eyes from the rear screen. A faint, distant flicker of red splashed against the deep black of space behind them. The pin point of flame pulsed steadily among the cold stars—it was the rocket wash of a ship, a ship far below the space lanes, a ship too black to be visible against its sable backdrop!

"Here he comes!" Mike said tensely.

"He's seen us by now." Nord's long fingers brought retarding jets flaming into brief life.

Their speed slackened. In the rear screen, the wash of the other ship swelled suddenly, and the outline of its dark hull cut a silhouette across the dying radiance of exhaust gasses.

It was Kadine's ship! In it was the secret of safe passage through the Asteroid Belt—a secret that would open a space lane for System Federation ships, give Science access to the guarded secrets of the mysterious Asteroids!

In it, too, were the papers which had brought the outlaw back from Jupiter's moons—gambling possible success there to wrest from the Federation itself scientific knowledge that might assure a pirate coup against interplanetary civilization!

D HAIN KADINE, whose cunning and skill were legendary, had never hesitated in battle. He did not hesitate now! The black hull of his ship loomed in the view screen, and a slender, dazzling pencil of white darted forth—a heat ray stopped down to its most penetrating beam, concentrating the maximum fiery energy into a tiny area of searing destruction.

Nord whipped their vulnerable plastic hull aside, and the beam flared harmlessly in the view screens, as it lashed past, spending its fury against cold space. Nord threw the drive control lever forward to the last notch.

The Patrol ship surged ahead, matching the speed of Kadine's vessel—blocking the outlaw from the safety of the Asteroids below!

"That guy doesn't fool around!" Mike Doren said hoarsely. His big hands were busy as the ray tube's cross hairs shifted in the rear view screen. "Neither do I!" he added savagely.

"Sunspot!" Holber cried. "You hit him, Mike!"

The thin heat ray danced into the dark hull—drew a spreading circle of dark, sullen red! Kadine's side jets flared.

"Stay with him, Mike." Nord ordered calmly. "That steel hull will take a lot of heat before you do any damage!"

Doren sent his beam lashing after Kadine's dancing ship, against which the circle of red faded, then glowed once more as the merciless heat found the spot again.

Holber's grey eyes blazed, and his long fingers wove their swift movements into a smooth pattern on the drive levers—following, like a dance partner, the wild dartings of the outlaw ship.

For a few arrested seconds, Kadine's ray tube was cold, as he turned all his frenzied attention to the drive. Vainly, he spun and twisted. Mike Doren grinning savagely, traced every desperate motion with the fiery pencil of his heat ray.

"He can't get past—and he can't turn back! He's got to keep coming!"

As though in silent agreement, Kadine whipped his ship out of its gyrations, and drove a straight course toward the stern of the Patrol fighter. In the split second it took Nord to react, the pirate drew closer. His black hull blocked out the stars behind, filled the rear screen! In the steel nose,

the red spot flared brighter, rising toward the white heat that meant disaster—

And the view screen was suddenly an incandescent patch of unbearable brilliance that burned all vision from Nord Holber's brain—brought his eyelids down instinctively over throbbing eyes! He reeled in his seat, head spinning, stomach writhing, and realization more sickening than physical agony in his mind.

Kadine had blinded them with a blast of his retarding jets! It was an old trick—a veteran space-fighter's trick that took the cool nerve of blasting your ship's nose forward into your enemy's ray, shielding your own eyes from his aft jets, until you were so close your nose almost covered his view screen, then— Risky, but it gained several precious seconds!

Seconds in which to strike! Nord's jaw was a piece of sculptured white rock against which the sagging muscles of his face drew themselves taut. His eyes—they had to open! He had to see! Kadine would use the seconds.

Holber's eyelids came up slowly, and he lifted his head, suddenly several times its weight, toward the view screen. The cabin swam before him—a confusion of grey and black shadows. He had an impression of a distorted blotch beside him, and he heard Mike cursing madly.

"Can't see, Nord! Can't get my eyes open!"

"Hold on, Mike!"

The blacker shadow beside him lurched, and he heard his partner stumble back to a sitting position. This his eyes were focusing again, painfully, on a blurred patch of black, dotted with painful pinpoints of brilliant blue-white—on the screen. The black began to thicken, harden about the stars—it was torn to shreds by a fiery nova! Kadine's heat ray was eating into the stern of the Patrol Ship!

BEHIND the black nightmare that settled again over his tortured eyeballs, swift reactions prodded at Nord's muscles. His long fingers found the drive levers, and held tight as they sent the ship off in a dizzy, twisting tangent to her course.

In his helmet, the valve clicked shut as outside pressure fell. Air was rushing from out through a gaping hole in the hull, but the ship responded perfectly to the controls.

"He didn't do any real damage," Nord gritted. "Not yet." Again, he forced his eyelids up, and the screens swam before him in a red haze.

"Kadine's down below us," his partner cried angrily. "He's running for the Belt! Saving those papers is worth more to him than our hides."

Without a word, his eyes bloodshot and terrible, Nord hurled the Patrol Ship downward after the outlaw.

"We're pretty close to the Asteroids," Mike warned mechanically. "Fragments may be pretty thick." His big mouth spread into a sudden grin. "Blast the fragments! We're after them anyway—if a couple come through the hull, that's a couple we won't have to fish for." He moved his big hands over the heat ray controls eagerly.

"Kadine will have to slow down some before he cuts into that Belt," Holber reasoned aloud. "Get your beam on his stern jet tubes, just behind the nozzles—you'll have a better chance than trying to melt his hull again. The tubes are heat resistant, but they're plenty hot—and jet tubes have been rayed out before this!"

The other nodded. "It's an old trick—as old as the one he pulled on us. Look—he's leveling off!"

They were gaining rapidly, as the black craft below lost speed. It lurched suddenly, portraying the amazement of the pirate within, as the ray flashed in his screen.

"You found him again, Mike!" Nord exulted grimly. "Right across the tubes!"

"He can't run, for those tubes won't last seconds!"

Kadine's fighter dogged frantically, in a brief, vain effort to shake the beam which followed every twist. Abruptly, the dark ship swerved off course.

"There goes one tube!" Doren shouted jubilantly. "He'll have to cut down his drive now—to trim the jets!"

The outlaw ship swung slowly in a climbing turn, and Kadine was sweeping black space with his fiery beam as he came.

Like fencing foils, the two dazzling pencils of light crossed and recrossed—slashing and stabbing for the ships. But it was the duel of a slower, heavily armored adversary against a faster, unprotected opponent—for Kadine's metal hull would stand long seconds of heat, and a touch of

his own stopped-down beam could bore into the vitals of the plastic Patrol Ship at a touch.

"What's he up to?" growled Mike Doren. Once again, he had the other ship glowing dangerously red. Still Kadine came on.

Nord's throbbing eyes were slitted almost shut. The other wouldn't get away with the same trick twice! As the ship loomed almost upon them, Nord laughed harshly, touched his own retarding jets briefly. Let the outlaw— Only then, he realized, suddenly—too late! Desperately, he threw the drive lever—as the glowing nose of the other ship smashed into their lower hull!

The universe spun around him. He saw the stars streak across the view screens, and the floor beneath his feet bulge upward under the terrible impact—even as the last surge of her jets wrenched the Patrol Ship free, sent her staggering drunkenly upward.

He gripped the control panel with long fingers whose steel clutch almost lifted him from the seat, and the grey eyes in his white face were bloodshot and wild! Beside him, Mike's rasping breath deepened into a groan.

"Our heat ray's out! That devil—"

Nord laughed. Their ship swung smoothly enough under its drive, as his hands shot over the levers. Of all the intricate wiring beneath them, only the ray circuit had been broken! But the bottom of their fighter had been torn open under the nose.

In the lower screen, he saw the asteroid fragments they'd stowed away below, floating in space, bumping lightly against Kadine's steel hull as the black ship turned back. *Steel hull! Asteroid fragments!* In his brain, the words rushed together into sudden, strange meaning with the thought of the heat ray!

Nord laughed again, throwing his body far across the seat to press the two studs before the astounded Mike. "Mike, maybe we don't need a ray!"

"I don't get it," his partner gasped.

BEHIND and below them, the little bay opened in the still undamaged section of their hull, the electro-magnet shot downward under its tiny automatic jets, and the winch paid out the cable.

"Sunspot!" the dazed Mike whispered mechanically. The magnet had struck Kadine's ship, and clung, the cable falling slack below as the winch continued to turn. "But what good does it do us, Nord? He can't drag us into the Belt with him, our mass will throw off his trick drive correction."

"Right! Kadine will have to finish us first—he can't ray that cable off!"

His partner nodded glumly. "Here he comes! And we can't touch him."

Nord Holber laughed again. "That's what he thinks! Mike, there's high frequency current in that cable."

He shot their battered fighter aside—to port—as the fiery beam flashed upward. The slack cable passed under and over the pirate's ship. Nord sent the Patrol vessel down, then to starboard and up again, as Kadine's fiery pencil of destruction whipped toward them.

"He doesn't suspect a thing," Holber said tensely. "It looks like fancy dodging we're doing. But look at the cable, partner! A couple more times around—"

The plastic ship was weaving an intricate course, dodging, yet feinting downward, only to dance upward and away—and the insulated cable was wound loosely around the enemy craft.

"O.K., Mike," Nord said at last. "Reverse that winch, and pull the cable out."

Doren, understanding breaking at last into his flaming blue eyes, pressed the stud, and stared into the lower screen. "A high frequency current," he whispered, "flowing through a coil around a metal core—Kadine's steel hull!"

Within the metal hull of Dhain Kadine's spacer induced electrical current lashed a torrent of irresistible energy against sluggish electro-magnetic potentialities. Resistance of the steel produced heat—heat more intense than Mike Doren's beam could create. Despite the bulk of the outlaw ship within those few turns of cable, the induced current, surging through the steel drove the temperature higher—higher—toward the melting point itself! And, in the inner-hull, it was the same—rising temperature, heat radiating, warming the air within the cabin—

"An induction furnace," said Nord Holber quietly. "It must be pretty warm inside there now!"

Before him, the visaphone jangled suddenly. The screen glowed as he snapped it on. In it the dark, hawklike face of Dhain Kadine, was a blurred, flickering, terror-white, blob. His voice shouted hoarse unintelligible words—rose almost to a shriek. Sweat drenched his clothes—poured from every pore of his skin, flashed dancing highlights on the screen.

Nord Holber's fist and arm gestured in unmistakable pantomime—*jump!*

"Shut the current off quick, Mike," he ordered, as the space suited figure of Dhain Kadine leaped frantically through the port of the black ship below them. "The Patrol

will want everything that's in that ship!"

Mike Doren pressed the stud, and his big mouth spread in a contented smile as the other swung their fighter through space at top speed, uncoiling the cable.

"When it cools down," Nord said, "we'll go aboard. After we give Kadine and the papers to the *Jovian Nymph*, we'll go back to base in his ship. I don't want to make the trip all the way in this space suit."

His partner's eyes lit up. "O.K. But, when we get to Mars Base, we'll ride our ship and drag that steel monstrosity in on the cable. After all, it's the last catch of 'asteroid fishing,' and the biggest!"



Captives of the Weir-Wind

By Ross Rocklynne

The girl held all the trumps, and Julian Darnay found himself in her power, being swept on a terror-flight through the void. Their objective—if they lived to reach it—was a world beyond all worlds . . . a planet where howling winds could kill and lakes of radium acted as graves.

JULIAN DARNAY came edging into the control room of his pirate ship, broad shoulders brushing against the hatch entrance. His dark, discontented eyes roved around the maze of space navigation instruments, came to rest on Mercury Bill, his pilot and partner.

"Where are we?"

"Ten million miles east of here and there," sighed Mercury Bill, so named because he was a slow-motion man.

"That," said Julian coldly, "is no answer."

"Good enough for a ship without a destination."

"Who said we haven't got a destination? Our destination is a ship—any merchant ship we pick up on our detectors."

Mercury Bill swung around in the bucket-shaped control chair, almond-shaped, opaque eyes very, very patient. He lighted a munibo weed, blew out greenish smoke. He said:

"Let's don't fool ourselves, Julian. What do you say we look back a few weeks and see what's been happening? Every merchanter we've sighted lately has been so heavily convoyed by the Old Guard we couldn't get within a thousand miles of it. Just because you and your father—God rest him—invented the fastest, trickiest, fanciest spaceship that ever rode the ether is no sign it can run the gauntlet the Old Guard is laying down these sad days. In fact, I guess the Old Guard would rather swing us and the *Acheron* into a trap than capture all the nasty pirates and prate ships between here and Saturn." His brows, a thick light fuzz which alone betrayed the decade difference in age between him and the younger man, arched. "Eh?"

Julian made a growling sound in his throat, strong face scowling darkly. Inaction. It had laid its weighted hand on him. What to do? Cruise out here, port astern of Saturn, waiting for some foolhardy lone spacer? Not much he wouldn't—not if he had to dispense with caution and attack a full convoy. Of course, that would be the end of him, of his crew and his ship, the *Acheron*—but boredom would be the end of him, too.

The intership communication 'phone buzzed. Julian scooped it up before Mercury could reach it.

It was the telescope observer. "Julian, an hour ago I sighted the *Spacehound*!"

Julian felt a tingle. "The *Spacehound*? Gunnardsen's boat?"

"That's it. Radiant point Hercules, thousand a second Earthward. I didn't say anything because you and Gunnardsen have been on the outs ever since you blasted off his hand in the mix-up down Titan-way. They gave us a buzz just now though. Zeeman Lascar, a fellow who says he's Captain Gunnardsen's second in command. Should I give you a hook-up?"

Julian's eyes were sparkling. "Put him on."

The buzz deepened an octave, and Julian snapped, "Darnay talking."

"Darnay, this is Zeeman Lascar." The voice was soft, slyly insolent. "Captain Gunnardsen asked me to get in touch with you. Important matter. Can you come across?"

"Why doesn't Gunnardsen contact me personally?"

"Can't. That is, the Captain is—ah—in-disposed. Or maybe too much of your voice in the Captain's ear would be more



Illustration by C. MARTIN

than the Captain could stand in one day."

"Well," said Julian coldly, "he's still an old fool, and you've got an uncivil tongue. But I'll accept the invitation. And to play safe, I'll bring a few of my men."

"Your whole crew, if you want to," Lascar said uncaringly. "We'll expect you then. I'll have my navigator get in touch with yours, to take care of the business of synchronizing our courses."

JULIAN hung up, a gleam in his eye, but his fighting smile changed to a scowl when he saw the way Mercury Bill was looking at him. Mercury Bill said, "Sometimes you're a fool."

"And sometimes you're a woman."

"A woman might do you some good," said Mercury grimly.

"You'd have us stagnate out here in space when there's the promise of devilry in Lascar's voice?" said Julian, taking a stance over the smaller man. He sneered. "Never mind. There's safety enough, all you'll want. Gunnardsen may hate me, but he's not the man to stoop to treachery. Now get Dirkie up there to take over. You're going across with me."

Mercury Bill relapsed into a grim silence, lighted another mumbo-weed, and jerked up the speaking tube.

An hour later, the two pirate ships, Julian's *Acheron* and Gunnardsen's *Spacehound*, flanked each other in space. Julian was first to leave the airlock, rocket flames shooting from the shoulder-jets of his space-suit, first to enter the open airlock of the other ship. After him came seven of his men. Once the airlock of the *Spacehound* had closed behind them, the men took off their suits and dropped them, then held their hands warily to their flame pistols.

"You have faith in numbers," said a voice, and the man Julian knew as Zeeman Lascar—twice before he had had occasion to see him from a distance—sauntered into the corridor.

Julian nodded curtly. "Faith in numbers, yes—but only when I lack faith in my environment."

Lascar's one-sided smile turned into laughter. His smoky dark eyes held mockery as he shrugged, made a motion and led them down the corridor. He dropped into step beside Julian. He was fully as tall as Julian, but whereas Julian's stride was

blunt, forthright, Lascar moved sinuously, pad-footed. Lascar said, watching Julian closely:

"The Captain has very strange ideas, Darnay. Peculiar person. You knew Gunnardsen well?"

"We were good friends," said Julian, shortly.

"Well, you won't find this Captain Gunnardsen the same as the one you knew. Very different. Don't say I didn't tell you."

Julian swung his head toward him, sharply. But Lascar's expression was bland.

They went past the fetid breath of the engine room and shortly stopped before a door which Lascar opened. He waved them in. Julian's eyes narrowed in thought as he entered the room. Tapestries, deep rugs, flowers, potted plants, flowered lamps—and incense.

Mercury Bill moved quickly up next to Julian, nervously biting the end off a mumbo-weed. "Something's haywire, Julian!" he said out of the side of his mouth. "Let's get going. Gunnardsen wouldn't have a room like this aboard any boat of his."

"He's changed," said Julian dryly.

"Not this much," snarled Mercury Bill sotto voce.

Julian cast him an iron glance as Lascar came up, offered them seats. But Julian's nerves were tingling. "We'll stand," he growled. "Where's Captain Gunnardsen?"

Lascar shrugged and broke into an open, malevolent grin. He stepped aside, and Julian was allowed to see across the length of the room, where the curtains along the wall broke open. A girl came into the room, and her eyes, blue as the devil-plants blooming on the shores of the Venusian sea, icily swept the men, riveted on Julian and held there. She drew herself up.

"I'm Captain Gunnardsen. Captain Julie Gunnardsen. Will you—gentlemen have a seat?"

Julian stood with feet forked, his dark broad features expressionless, rock-hard as he crossed glances with her. It was not dismay, nor surprise, nor anger at Lascar's equivocation that he felt now. Rather, it was sorrow.

"So Gunnardsen's dead." He made the statement simply. The lovable, bull-headed

old pirate who had been Julian's father's friend and then Julian's in the course of time, came to mind with a pang.

She shrugged. "The Old Guard got him last week. I'm his daughter. I let you think it was my father you were coming to see. Only way I could have got you over here."

SHE took her eyes off him for the first time, extracted a cigarette from a gem-studded case, moved thoughtfully across the room and sank on a divan. She lighted the cigarette, and one by one let her glance rest on the men who had come with Julian. The command was unmistakable. The men shifted sheepishly on their feet, lost their open stares, turned their backs and sought seats. Mercury Bill alone was rebellious.

"We'll be leaving soon, miss," he growled, but it was evident that he was speaking to Julian, in urgent warning. He sat down then, on the edge of a chair, his eyes continuously, lazily, sweeping the confines of the room while he exuded the greenish smoke of the mumbo-weed, as if in protest against the inense that flooded the quarters.

Julie Gunnardsen said expressionlessly, "Sit here, Julian."

Julian sat next to her. Out of the corner of his eye he was keeping track of Lascar, who leaned against the door, sensuous mouth smiling with some devilish, withheld mirth.

Julian said, "I never expected to see a pirate in skirts."

"And you'll never see one."

"Except you."

"Not me."

"You're Gunnardsen's daughter, Julie; so what could you be except what he was?"

She said contemptuously, "Not a pirate—a sensible human being maybe. Don't call me Julie, please."

He grinned maliciously. "Why not? It happens to be my own name. Your father named you after the son of his best friend."

"And I'm sorrier about that than I can say. More, I'm sorry I have to call on you to help me—you of all people. I haven't forgotten what you did to my father."

"Well, what *did* I do to your father?"

Her capable, shapely jaw dropped as if in astounded incredulity at the effrontery of

that remark. She flared; "Betrayed him! Deliberately learned of his plans to raid the Moon cache and then beat him to it, not even trying to divide the tons of platinum booty with him. Do you deny it?"

"No, Julie, I don't."

"And then," she added, almost writhing in a torment of hate; "when he came to you for an explanation, you repaid him by blasting his gun-hand off. You won't deny that either. Everybody in space knows the facts."

She halted, breathing hard, but he said nothing more, a small faint smile on his dark face. She snapped: "Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if my father hadn't been an older man at the time; you young and quick. And if you hadn't been 'friends.' Anyway, that's the way I feel." She scowled, shifted her slight golden-brown body back against the cushions of the divan, crossed one bare leg over the other, and with jerking gestures smoothed down the short skirt caught around her hips with a Sam Browne belt.

"I'm a fool for setting you against me, like this, first off, when I need your co-operation. But—well, Julian, tell me what you think of the new trend the Old Guard is taking?"

His brows came down.

She said patiently: "You're not fooling anybody—except yourself. You know what I mean. The Old Guard is growing into a real organization. Within five years there won't be a pirate left in the System. Especially you—and the *Acheron*."

He was amused, mobile lips writhing in a smile. "The Old Guard'll come back to normal one of these days, believe me."

Her look withered him. "Dream on, Julian!"

And he laughed. "You're trying to reform me?"

"I'm pointing out," she said, "that there're going to be slim pickings for a pirate from now on. My father saw the trend, but he never let on. He thought someday I'd be a pirate's wife. He was so innured to piracy he thought it was an honest profession. I'm telling you it might pay to look for honest treasure."

He leaned back in the corner of the divan, studying her. Beautiful. Enough to make any man's blood run faster. And with that incense curling off the table next

to her, wisping through and around the finely spun, golden hair which just touched her slim shoulders. Alluring. He felt an unaccustomed pang. She did hate him—probably with some violence, and, superficially at least, with good reason. But it didn't matter. He was hard, strong, ruthless. Into that pattern, no lily-livered woman fitted.

He said quietly: "What do you want of me, Julie?"

"You can help me ease my conscience a little."

This time, his thick black brows arched upward.

She said simply: "I loved my father, Julian. But in the thirty years of his career he brought too much misery, too much death to other people. It was his life, but he was wrong. Years ago, I decided that when he died I was going to make restitution in full. . . . Oh, don't laugh!" she cried, half-rising. She made a snapping gesture with her hand. "Radium! A pound or a ton of radium would be priceless to Earth and give me a fortune besides. That would make up for it. Then I'd go to Earth and live as a human being should."

"I see." He nodded. "A home on a hill-top, flowers, church, children, taxes, a husband with glasses and stooped shoulders—that's the ambition of Julie Gunnarsen, who was born in the skies, free as the stars, master of herself and unmastered—Julie Gunnarsen, daughter of the Vikings. Is that what you want?"

"That's what I want—and while I'm planting flowers, you'll be pushing them up; if you're lucky enough to get buried. Well, Julian—"

Lascar came padding across the room.

"Your pardon, Julie," he said in obvious impatience. "If you won't get to the point—Darnay, we want to borrow the *Acheron*."

Julian's eyes showed his startlement. "Why?"

"Because you've got the only boat in the System that can get to the binary in less than five years."

THE binary. Julian was beginning to comprehend. The binary was a twin planet system billions of miles beyond Pluto. The planets had just been discovered.

Lascar went on: "Other spaceships use enormous quantities of hydroxor, Darnay, while you continue forever on a ton of lead, by means of a propulsion process you and your father invented. You've heard of the binary? Well, as she says, our Julie is ashamed of her father's misdeeds—"

Julie's star-blue eyes snapped toward him. "Shut up, Zeeman. I'll handle this."

Lascar held her glance insolently, sniffed, went back to stand by the door again. Her glance lingered on him for a moment with a quiet deadliness. Then she turned back to Julian.

"The binary has radium, by spectroscopic analysis, Julian. Loads of it, apparently."

His expression was quizzical. "Well, what of that?"

"Wouldn't it mean riches the rest of your life?" Suddenly her lips, subtly tinted with a scarlet rouge, were parted, and she was leaning forward tensely. "Doesn't it mean anything to you to know that you can bring radium to a radium-starved Earth—you and only you—in anything less than five years?"

"Well," he said reasonably, "at least they'll have it in five years." He laughed, suddenly in a vicious mood to bait her. "And riches don't interest me—except those I fight for."

Her tensed muscles were abruptly relaxed, the hope that had shown in her eyes was abruptly, consciously erased. Her expression became indifferent.

"I expected the answer. From such as you, what else? Well, it makes no difference." For a moment, her eyes stone-hard, she focused her glance on nothing. Her lips contracted thinly. She turned her head abruptly, reached over to the incense burner, selected a triangular piece of the stuff, held it out for Lascar to light, put it down into the burner. She closed the lid, then leaned back against the pillows, her eyes broodingly half-closed. She moved her glance to rest on him.

"You may wonder about the incense, Julian. The smell of the engine room is always coming in here. There's nothing worse than the smell of hydroxor—for me anyway. You'll have to bear it, if it offends you."

"There are advantages," he murmured, a gleam in his eyes. His glance deliberately started at her bare, trim ankles.

Her eyes were steady. "I'm sorry I couldn't convince you, Julian. But I see your point. It weakens your own defense of piracy for someone to make retribution for the sins of your kind. That's it, eh?"

Strangely, her voice toward the last was blurred, as if infused with static. And a dancing cloud rippled her face. The extremities of Julian's body abruptly lost sensation, and a strange sound, like the screaming of an alarm siren, ballooned in his brain. For one second of loathsome horror, he reviewed his sensation, and then sent surging along his motor nerves the command to rise, to fight—to fight!

And he was on his feet, by only a miracle. There he stood, but he looked around on a dark cloud which almost hid his men. Through it he could see his men—one, two, three—seven—he counted them. Heads on chests, lolling—in sleep or death? Even Mercury Bill.

Near the door, Lascar—inert on the floor. And on the divan, Julie. Comfortably seated there, head lying back, perfect face composed, eyes closed in sleep. As if she knew she would sleep.

The incense. And he couldn't have known. This languorous room, the incense itself—all a trap. He fell to his knees, his lips grimacing, the abnormal silence pressing with frightening impact on his ears. So that was it. And his last moments of consciousness, he could appreciate the clever treachery of Captain Julie Gunnardsen. She and Lascar had dulled his suspicions up to the last helpless moment, by breathing in the anesthetic themselves . . .

JULIAN stirred, raised his great chest in the vague sigh of returning life. Beneath him a hard mattress, and—as his eyes opened—around him the shadowy darkness of an unlighted cabin.

He recognized the cabin; his own quarters aboard the *Acheron*.

His glance roved, finally rested on two shadowy figures, one seated, one standing. He was not bound, so he came slowly to a sitting position.

Lascar, standing behind Julie, centered the flame pistol on Julian's stomach.

"Julian," the girl said finally, "we've got your boat after all."

"I gather that," he admitted.

"Your crew is aboard the *Spacehound*,

in captivity until we come back from the binary. They didn't like the idea of the trade-in, but we promised to send them your arm if they were stubborn."

He grinned tauntingly. "You'd never have done it, Julie. Not you."

Lascar said coldly, "Your arm, a foot, and then a head—then the rest of you to make the collection complete."

Julian leaned forward toward Julie as if in deepest confidence. "Julie, listen. I'll do anything you want me to do, if you let me kill Lascar sometime. That's what I'm beginning to live for. It's a deal?"

She first smiled grimly, then looked up at Lascar, laughing a little. "Zeeman, what do you say to that?"

A dark flush spread on his face. "You know your own mind, Julie."

Julie rose with a supple motion, still smiling as if in secret mirth. She looked down at Julian. "Julian, it's a deal—and your part in the deal is very simple. Stick with me until I'm on my way back to Earth with the radium the hospitals need. As for killing Lascar—well, it won't be the first time I've pinned my hopes on a weaker man than him."

Lascar gained two inches in height and his black eyes showered the room with fury, as if a door had been opened abruptly from his brain. He bit out through his teeth, hurling the words at the girl, "Some day you'll have said that once too often—Captain!"

He turned abruptly, passed slammingly through the door.

For a moment the girl's eyes lingered on the door, and she shuddered. She gradually brought her eyes back to the pirate's.

"Lascar loves me," she said simply. "But it's love with—fangs."

In the half-light, Julian came easily to his feet, found himself removed from the girl a scant few inches. She was wearing a perfume, and without warning it was drugging his senses, charging his blood with a warmth that swept through him with the strength of a tide. In his heart, in that moment, he knew he was lost. But in that moment, too, it didn't matter. She was caught in his arms, hardly as tall as his chin, but big enough to sweep everything out of his thoughts but her. Her lips were warm, soft, an emulsion which laved his soul. So he held her for a second that

endured—and broke. She shoved away, fighting, panting in little gasps. She slapped him twice with full fury—once with each hand.

"You—fool!" she almost screamed. "What do you mean by that? What do you think I am? Don't you think I hate you for what you did to my father—for beating him to the Moon-cache—for betraying him—for burning his hand off—"

He clamped her hysterically waving arms to her shoulders with his great hands. "Shut up, Julie," he said gently. His hard lips set mockingly, with a trifle of bitterness. "You're as bull-headed a spacer as your father, bless him—and I suppose you'll doubt me to the end of eternity, as he would if he had lived. But believe me, the Moon-cache episode has a different face to it than the one it shows you."

"You lie," she snapped, flinging herself away from him. Her fists clenched at her sides, and she visibly controlled herself. She said through barely moving lips, "Remember, Julian, ours is a business deal, nothing else. Keep it that way. I hate you, but I happen to need your ship, and that pilot of yours, and I need you to instruct my men in the operation of the ship. Beyond that, you have less value to me than the air that carries my voice. Understand?"

"Understood," said Julian, his lips mocking-hard. "But not agreed upon. As I told you, Julie, I enjoy only those things I fight for. I think I've found a thing to fight for. Fair warning, eh?"

Her glance was one of utter, lowest contempt. "Fight ahead. But lay another hand on me, and you'll find I can fight, too—with a flame pistol that will fire once. Fair warning!"

And as it had short minutes before with Zeeman Lascar, the door slammed behind her.

THE *Acheron*, that fabulous ship of space which was known from one end of the solar system to the other, feared and hated by the Old Guard, now hurled itself at near-mythical velocities across the void of space. Straight as a die and straighter, it heaved with tenacity to the course Mercury Bill laid down for it—its destination a system of two worlds, wrapped in their atmospheres of white as if they were but cocoons ready to break open. For fifteen days its

incredible speed rose, and the billions of miles dropped behind.

Far away was the Sun now, only a bright star. Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto—these were like the tiny sparks of the exhaust left behind in the *Acheron's* tremendous etheric wake. And as far away as the Sun from the ship—as far away as that was Julie Gunnardsen from the pirate Darnay.

Mercury Bill, sullen ever since Julian had struck a bargain with Julie, slowly swung the perilous eye-piece attachment to his eye, manipulated the photo-amplifier with blunt fingers. On the screen, full-blown, there leaped into being a magnified image of the binary. Julian, standing behind Mercury, studied it intently. The planets were of equal sizes, but apparently not of the same densities, for all the figures thus far gathered showed that one planet was slightly deflected from its course by the revolution of the other around it.

Mercury Bill said, settling glumly back in the chair while the ship roared through the emptiness; "Mark the planets well, Julian. One of 'em 'll doubtless witness your death."

Julian was good-natured. "Death is heaven-sent when it strikes you down in the midst of danger. Little time for fear, then—the fear you like to curdle your stomach with, Mercury. Besides, being the first human to set foot on a new planet might be worth the highest price a man can pay for the privilege."

Mercury Bill shot an incredulous, scornful glance over his shoulder. "Ha! Julian, you think you'll ever set foot on the binary—with a mister like Zeeman Lascar sharing ship air? He'll kill you from the back—kill us all, likely. He isn't in sympathy with Julie's desire to take off her father's boots. He doesn't like the idea of you being in love with Julie."

"My being in love with Julie is news to me," Julian said coldly.

"But to nobody else aboard ship—probably including Julie." Mercury suddenly swung around in the swivel chair. His homely face was drawn, tense. He swung his left hand in a characteristic snapping gesture of pleading. "Dammit, Julian—why don't we throw the whole thing over? The control room's ours right now—there are a thousand gadgets we know about that



Arms linked, they dropped swiftly toward the alien planet.

they don't. I could turn three knobs and press a button and they'd never know what hit 'em. We could turn around and head for Titan—"

"And put Lascar in his place?"

"Six feet under," nodded Mercury, his eyes glinting with enthusiasm.

Julian smiled. "I've made a promise, Mercury," he said softly. "I think I'll keep it."

He grinned at Mercury's open scowl, turned, swung from the control room—but with the undertones of that conversation stayed with him. He felt a tingle. Danger, yes—but he'd be ready for it, for there was no man who could best Darnay the pirate aboard his own ship; not aboard the *Acheron*, which was equipped with trickery that could outmatch any guile hatched by a possible enemy.

Yet, there were forces at work even now which were to nullify Julian's confidence in victory: the binary planets themselves.

HER lovely eyes wide with eagerness, her breath tremulous as she leaned forward and stared through the vision screen at the great white-sheeted worlds between which the *Acheron* hovered ten days later, Julie Gunnarden's animosity toward Julian was for once lost in the wonder of what she saw. Two worlds—which to land upon?

Julian stood to one side of Julie, a cynically hard expression drawing his lips tight. He was no fool—he was at this moment aware that Zeeman Lascar, a round half dozen of the crew behind him, was coming up the corridor toward the control room, flame pistol drawn. The miniature detector strapped to his wrist told him that—a detector which had been born in the fertile brain of the pirate, its secret possessed only by him.

"We might try eeny-meenie-minie-moe?" suggested Julian.

She hardly looked at him. "The heavier world," she said. "It's there we're headed. I've made my decision. They're both radioactive, else their atmospheres would be frozen stiff." She arched a plucked eyebrow at Mercury. Mercury ignored the command, knowing of the mutinous plot which was now hatching.

Julian said, "Julie, before we go anywhere, there's a little business to be got

out of the way. The business of killing Zeeman Lascar."

Her face hardened. "I've had enough of that feud, Julian. Zeeman's done nothing to you."

"It isn't what he's done. It's what he and six of your crew are planning to do at this minute."

The quiet meaning in his voice got through to her. "Why!" she gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Zeeman Lascar's plans include killing me and Mercury, taking over leadership of this vessel, and using you as he sees fit. For him, it's the psychological moment. Mercury and I have filled our function of showing him and the crew how to operate the ship and of getting the ship to the binary. Now he's going to strike."

Her eyes narrowed, and suddenly she spun around, Julian turning more leisurely. Zeeman Lascar stood at the hatch, six mutineers behind him, grinning. Julie's eyes focused on the flame gun as Lascar spoke:

"Over in the corner, Julie. You're no longer master on this ship. Darnay's got it right—though much good his knowledge is going to do him."

Julie half turned toward Julian, her expression astounded. "But if you knew—" she gasped. Her lips tightened. She fell into a slight crouch. "Playing the fool, Zeeman—again?" she bit out.

Little golden sparks formed in Lascar's slitted eyes. He laughed good-naturedly. "The other time I played the fool was this morning, when I tried to kiss you, eh? Ah, well, the turning point has come. Possibly your hate for the man who betrayed your father is beginning to show its other face. I'll correct your notions."

Without warning he pulled the trigger of his weapon and Mercury Bill slumped in the pilot chair, a column of smoke spurting upward from his body; and at the same moment, Julian leaped, snarling.

He came full tilt up against Lascar, sent him crashing into his men. Lascar fell, and Julian picked him up. For a moment he held the traitor, feeling the strength of his body running into his giant arms, into his fingers, felt his fingers flex on Lascar's throat. He savored the moment, the moment of animal hate when the luxury of being a human is to forget all human instincts of mercy. He had no mercy for

Lascar—no mercy short of a quick death. His were brute instincts, consciously acquired, and so controlled that he could take time to throw a savage glance at Julie, who stood in a pose of statuesque dismay at the events which had occurred so quickly. In one second, his glance told his intentions in detail, and demanded her permission.

Her permission, and the twist of the wrist that would have ended Lascar's life, never came. The *Acheron* was abruptly a pinwheel, flinging through space, jumbling together everything, inorganic and living inside her. Where the meteoroid had landed, none would ever know. It did not matter. The screams of the beings inside the *Acheron* were lost in that other series of screams, animal in nature, of plates and girders being twisted beyond recognition.

Hurling through the air, coming up short against a bulkhead, Julian understood at once what had happened. Dismay flooded his brain like needles. He heard a dreadful whine as air pressed itself from the ship into the outer space. Shock screamed at him, and thereafter he had no thought save one.

Julie's crew awoke no chord in him. But the thought of Julie—of Mercury—these were the pains that goaded him to furious action. The *Acheron*—this he knew—was no longer a ship, but a mass of rived metal floating between two worlds. There was no ship lighting, no muted hum of the engine room, heart of the ship. Only the racking cries of disintegration. With that thought, he flung himself in one mad, instinctive burst of reasoning toward the half dozen lockers lining the horribly convoluted bulkhead of the control room. Even as he flung open the doors, gouged out the space-suits therein, a tremendous crack yawned the width of the control room, showing the cold, unmoved stars, and a segment of one planet. Air pressure dropped, and his brain reeled.

NONETHELESS, the job was his, and by sheer necessity his eye scoured the room, fastened on Julie where she lay amid the wreckage. He reached her, hurled her to her feet, shook her. And her eyes opened, drugged with shock.

He snarled, thrust a space-suit at her, forced a helmet over her head, and left the problem of clothing herself against airless-

ness in her own hands. Next—Mercury. Him he found, and not dead. Seconds later, he was buckling the last of the kneecaps on Mercury, and felt a profound gratitude as he sensed Julie hovering beside him, her face pale in the starlight. She was holding another space-suit, and with the last of his strength, he managed to thrust one heavy-booted leg through the stiff fabric. Then the red spots dancing on his brain ate their holes through his consciousness, and there were moments of confused memory. He came to, breathing hard of the oxygen that washed his face.

Julie was kneeling over him. He brushed her aside, came drunkenly to his feet.

"Thanks, Julie," he gasped. He turned the oxygen gauge up another notch. Now his eyes sharpened. "Lascar?"

"Gone," said Julie.

"Gone!" And it was the truth. Of Lascar and those who had plotted with him, there was no sign.

"Blown out into space," whispered Julie. There was now an immense silence around them, but Julian's sharp ears detected something that sent a thrill of fright along his nerves. A labored, pounding ululation that was almost below the threshold of audition. His face behind the helmet twisted with urgency. "Blown out into space," he bit out, "or else they've saved themselves as we have."

His great, gauntleted hand snatched up a twenty-pound flame pistol from a rack as he twisted his hulking body toward Mercury. He brought the smaller man to his feet, shook him. Mercury staggered, and slumped against Julian.

"Not dead?" whispered Julie.

"Not dead! A head-crease—but even a heart-blow wouldn't have done for him. We knew Lascar was coming—we had our skin-shields on. No power Lascar had in his gun could have touched either one of us beyond a certain low energy level. He's all right—but if he had been conscious at the controls, we'd still have the *Acheron*."

"Meteoroid?"

He nodded jerkily, his head cocked again for that frightening sound from within the bowels of the ruptured vessel. "Whirlpool of flotsam always sucking through between the two planets. We were in the way. Now, Julie." He grasped her arm, spoke tersely. She nodded, and while he held Mercury

erect, disappeared up a ladder and squeezed through an opening left in the storage room over the controls. She reappeared moments later with parachute packs. It was while Julian was strapping Mercury's on, that Mercury revived. Succinctly, Julian related the story, ending:

"Catalyst tanks are about to go—and we're going, too, before the explosion scatters us far and wide."

Julian cast an iron glance at Julie, whose senses seemed numbed with shock, and motioned toward the yawning crack which led to open space. She edged through it, with her booted feet pushed forcefully against the undone ship, went spinning away. Shortly, the two men followed. Arms linked, wrapped around with a devastating sense of aloneness, they watched the *Acheron*, legendary ship of space, contract to a tiny black circle athwart the unconcerned skies.

A tiny black circle that abruptly became a blinding-white circle and then a blazing nova as the explosion caught it.

The crew of the *Acheron* was dead for the most part—such seemed certain. But Lascar? The six with him? Julian looked with grim eyes at the white-wrapped planet toward which they were falling, with acceleration. They were marooned now, without a ship, without much hope, Earth billions of miles Sunward. And if Lascar, alive, were marooned with them—?

After a few hours, the planet of their destiny enclosed them in the outer layers of its atmosphere. The stars distorted, blanked out—and an amazingly swift stratospheric tornado took hold of them, whipped them along.

Mercury Bill, plainly longing for a mumbo weed, shouted, "Parachutes?"

Julian answered uneasily, "Not yet. This wind could rip them to shreds."

He was peering downward puzzled. Strange planet, he thought. The atmospheric fog was dissipating somewhat, giving occasional glimpses of the terrain spread out miles below, like a great Mercator projection. Unlike a Mercator, there was no sign of continents—indeed, no river, no lake, no ocean, no mountain range marred the monotonous perfection of that incredibly flat area.

"These are planetary winds," Julie Gunnarsen called weakly, as if recover-

ing at long last from a harrowing ordeal. "Every planet that rotates slips out from under its own atmosphere. Equatorial winds are rising from the Equator, slipping up into the higher latitudes toward the poles."

"Then we're going toward one of the poles," Julian said.

Mercury added in wonder, "This planet must be rotating *fast*! We're really going places . . . I could do for a smoke—I hope we have some oxygen wherever we land—if we do land."

NO sooner had Mercury finished than Julie gasped, pointed. "There! This planet isn't entirely barren. A sort of a green spot, just on the horizon, and coming in fast."

Julian scanned this new feature. Feature it was, for it had none but drabness to offset it. It was a green spot, a precise circular area, an island set like an emerald on a grey, dead ocean.

"Vegetation," Julian diagnosed.

"Not vegetation," Julie said flatly. "This planet is heated and lighted entirely by radioactivity from the interior. Plants don't live in a barrage of radium—alpha, gamma and beta—rays. Can't."

Julian locked his great hands a little tighter—Mercury was hanging onto him on the left, Julie the right. He said with scorn, "Don't be positive of that. Maybe the rays are too weak to be harmful—or maybe vegetation has adapted itself."

It was a small difference of opinion, but it served to bring the greater conflict into mind. Julie's perfect face hardened and she fixed her eyes away from his.

"Let it go," she said coldly. "Main thing to argue, if you must argue, is why there should be a green spot at all—one with the edges nicely trimmed, in a manner of speaking; and how it's going to keep us living until somebody else comes from Earth five years from now to rescue us."

Her voice was torn away at the last. They rode a highballing river of air that was flinging them with the force of a cosmic slingshot. By the time they came out of it, senses dazed, the situation that confronted them was horrifying.

The green spot was coming up—or, they were falling toward it. Not in the grip

of horizontal winds. But under the pure straight-down, unalleviated, smashing force of gravity.

Julian's throat erupted with a shout. "Parachutes!" He flung the word out in a great roar, and with one mighty motion pushed Julie and Mercury away from him. For one drawn-out second his natural buoyant sense of hope, the human instinct never to give up which was strong in him, faded before the shocking belief that the chutes wouldn't open quickly enough. The wind currents, those atmospheric disturbances which had amazingly borne them here, were gone.

But he pulled the rip cord nonetheless, heard three consecutive pistol shots as the air caught in his own, Julie's and Mercury's chutes. They were a bare hundred feet up when that happened; and only twenty feet separated them from a smashing impact when the chutes stopped their fall—then eased them into a landing. A landing which sent Julian bowling along for twenty feet, spread-eagled him dazed on the ground.

He lay where he was for a moment, then gave a whole-hearted, exasperated curse and came erect.

Mercury was walking toward him, grinning, and already he was smoking. His helmet was thrown back on his shoulder.

Julian snapped, "Always the fool. The air might have killed you. Where's Julie?" He unbuckled his own helmet.

"Well, somebody had to find out if the air was good, didn't they?" Mercury turned a slow circle. "Julie!"

They were standing, fortuitously, in a small clearing. Grass, long, wiry and matted, was underfoot. Vegetation, trees, bushes of a tender, barkless type towered around them in a veritable maze of jungle. Julian saw a large fluttery thing darting from a deeply perfumed, blossoming fruit tree—an insect. The same glance revealed a small, furry scampering creature. But his sharp eyes saw nothing of the girl.

Mercury said doubtfully, "I remember seeing her pull the shrouds a little too enthusiastically. Guess she landed the other side of those trees."

"Julie!" Julian raised his voice, sharply. No answer, "All right, come on," he told Mercury, and started away at a fast

walk. They broke through the hemming trees and bushes, and after ten minutes of that, stopped appalled. This was jungle, tenacious, creeping, thorny. No end to it. Julian's face grew dark with irritation—and after another ten minutes there was dismay, a battered frustration.

Mercury said lowly, "Julian, I've got a feeling Lascar and his men broke free from the *Acheron*, that they're down here, too."

"You, too?" Julian growled softly in his throat, fingers working into blunt, uncompromising fists. "If he is down here, it'll be bad news for Julie if he runs across her. Well, what to do now?"

MERCURY'S answer was simple. He started walking again.

Time passed—one hour, two, a half dozen. And then, from the sheer weariness of fighting the jungle, and knowing they had accomplished nothing, they broke into a clearing, and with one accord lowered themselves to the soft, rotting humus composing the jungle floor. They sat there, saying nothing; Mercury's face calm, fatalistic; Julian's bitter.

For him, this was a completely unexpected turn of events. Enough that they were marooned, with small chance of survival in a radioactive atmosphere, with no chance of rescue in less than five or more years, still the additional complication of Julie's loss had been added. Yet Julian knew he must find her, if they were to make any headway at all.

He felt that the green spot was uninhabited by any variety of intelligent people. Yet there was another pole of the planet, and a civilization might be there.

That this was a pole he was certain. According to Farrel's Law of Planetary Winds, air masses fall behind on any rotating world. Because of the spherical nature of a planet, those winds twisted in a screw motion from the equator through the stratosphere toward the poles, where, reaching the poles, they dropped groundward again and spiraled equatorward.

One of the baffling points in the explanation was the windlessness of this green spot, outside whose precisely circular limits the winds presumably began again. The lack of wind was responsible for the vegetation.

Judging by the view from the air, the planet was a near-perfect sphere, completely level, and rotating at miraculous velocity to be able to create the winds. No lakes, oceans, mountain ranges or valleys to break up the perfect operation of Farrel's Law, either, as on Earth or the other planets. Well, then, there was another green spot at the other, opposite pole.

Mercury's grin was wry when Julian communicated his thoughts. "Sure. First we find Julie, if Lascar hasn't got her by this time. Then, if we don't find a civilization here that can help us build the *Acheron II*, we simply cross the planet and find one over there."

"Ten thousand miles away," Julian nodded. "Only—how do we get through the wind?"

Mercury threw a smoke ring that held its shape for fifteen feet. "Julian," he said, "give me a ship and put me out in space and I'll take you anywhere. I'll dip inside the Sun's corona. I'll ice-skate the old boat across the surface of Pluto in fancy figure eights. But put me on a planet the long-bearded scientific boys haven't even figured out yet, and I'm no good. I don't like planets anyway. They've got gravity. They make you heavy. Space is what I like. Space," he whispered. He shut his eyes.

Julian said disgustedly, "Then lift yourself against this gravity—Heaven knows it can't be a third of Earth's—and the quicker we get things done, the quicker you'll get out in space again." He was off, without waiting for an answer.

It happened then.

There was a sly twanging sound, a bright wooden sliver spearing through the radioactive air. It lanced toward Julian, pierced his space suit, and halted abruptly, tip quivering in the raw flesh of his shoulder.

Julian roared with surprised pain. The arrow lunged laxly, and he jerked it out, its tip bright with blood. With the same motion, he was hurling himself toward the twisted tree on whose outjutting limb stood a pygmy.

Julian knew less anger than triumph as he charged. There *was* life here, savage life probably, but at least it was a chance, a wedge that might give him insight into

or leeway toward the solution of his problems. The arrow itself had been harmless, was constructed only to fell tiny creatures of the woods. Yet it was imperative that he get his hands on the wielder of the bow.

But the pygmy went in a flash, with a last frightened look from his flat, elongated eyes. His bare feet twinkled. The grass skirt depending from his tiny hips rose in the heat of his flight. His cream-colored, hairless head, out of all proportion to the rest of his three-foot body, wobbled ludicrously from side to side as he twisted, slid, and ducked under and through growths that Julian had to work his way around.

As was inevitable, he lost sight of the creature; but Mercury came panting up as Julian faltered in the search, pointed out the tiny, toeless footprints in the rotten, fertile earth. Mercury was off like a hound, and Julian deliberately fell behind, following from a distance.

Like a warning clang in his mind, something was striking the wrong note.

Why had the pygmy, knowing the futility of his tiny arrow, attacked Julian?

The question no sooner formed than it was answered. Julian broke into an amazed curse, stopped in his tracks, and disgorged his flame pistol from its holster. He fired by instinct.

At best, it had been pure luck, his seeing Lascar's man, standing behind the tree. And it was little more than luck which sent the concentrated beam of heat true to its mark before the ambusher accomplished the cold-blooded murder of Mercury Bill.

THE man — Kramer his name — screamed, dropped his gun, reeled out into the open. He fell to one knee, hand clasped to his right shoulder, head drooping while retching sounds came from his throat. Julian reached him, felled him flat on his back with one open-handed blow, held him down by the throat.

Mercury came up. "Thanks, Julian!" He paled. "Lascar's here, then; his cut-throats with him."

Kramer's narrow-spaced eyes opened. He smiled a sick, defiant grin.

Julian snarled, "So it was a trap. Your life, now, Kramer, if you talk. Where's

Lascar? Captain Gunnardsen? That pygmy—he was sent to lead us your way?”

It required the briefest of persuasion to get an answer.

Lascar and all six men had landed—a dozen hours before. He had found a colony of savages, telepathetic to even a greater degree than some of the inhabitants of Mars and Venus. He had communicated with them, had held some of them as hostages on threat of death if others didn't spread through the green spot and find the whereabouts of their enemies.

“Lascar's got the Captain already,” Kramer said sullenly. “One of the pygmies saw you two a while ago, so Lascar sent me to ambush you with the pygmy's help. Then Lascar was going to come back and get me.”

“Come back from where?”

“From the other side of the planet. He wanted to get over there in a hurry, get started on things before the radioactivity did us in. These pygmies claim there's a scientific race of pygmies over there, first cousins, I guess. Or there used to be. They haven't heard from them in a couple centuries so they aren't sure. Lascar figures he can get them to build him a ship like the *Acheron*.”

“Go on, Kramer,” Julian snapped when Kramer stopped. “How's he getting across the planet?”

“I don't know nothin' about it,” Kramer said sullenly. “It's some kind of a screw transportation system. Hasn't been used for a couple centuries, but the pygmies say it'll still work. A system of rails, I guess. Some of the rails are broken. Some aren't. If you travel a broken rail, you go flying off into space, because the planet spins fast enough to throw you off. Nobody knows which rails are broken and which aren't.”

He stopped. Julian raised his hand threateningly.

“Oh, I'll tell you the rest of it,” Kramer sulked. “You won't make anything of it anyway. Lascar didn't, and the pygmies didn't know either. There's a couple of rail depots on the edge of this place; regular path to it, if you can find it. Ain't far from here. Thing is, though, the leader of this village told Lascar you have to start across with the rising of the Moon!”

Julian squinted at the man, face hardening. The man was stubborn. “It's the truth. That's what the pygmy told us. You start across when the Moon rises, he said. Sounds like Halloween, eh? I don't get it, myself.” He shrugged. “Lascar thought it was some sort of a superstition. Guess it is.”

“The Moon,” Mercury said thoughtfully, “would be the other planet.”

For the better part of a minute, Julian squatted there, one hand holding his captive down, a series of thoughts starting in his brain. A clue here, a clue there—they added up to one of the most amazing transportation systems that had ever been assembled, and a planet that was unique amongst all the solar array. Slowly he came erect, dragging the prostrate man with him.

“I promised you your freedom,” he said shortly. “It's yours. Now get out,” and Julian took Mercury's arm, turned and at a quick pace began walking away.

Mercury sputtered, “But Julian—!”

Julian whirled with a speed that was inconceivable for his massive body. His flame pistol was out in a fractional second, was blasting its livid hell-flame. Lascar's man, holding the flame pistol which he had picked up from where Julian had purposely left it, didn't have time to pull the trigger. He gripped at his seared breast with both hands, clawing at his death wound, emitted a sobbing outcry, and pitched to the ground. Julian stood over him with contempt.

“A fit death for back-stabbers,” he stated scornfully, “and an incompetent one at that. Well, we've got a course of action worked out now, Mercury. It's the other side of the planet for us. Game?”

Mercury's eyes lidded. “If it's a machine with an engine and controls, a stop-and-start mechanism, and a good rail to travel, I'm with you. If it's none of those, I'll see you to the depot.”

“—and make the trip with me,” Julian laughed. “Chances are we'll not find much to fear here, Mercury—not much more than in a hop over the asteroids.”

“Not much, of course, except a broken rail. A broken rail that lets you fly right off into open space. Well, I'm not the man to keep you from the woman of your choice. In fact, the more I think about

Julie, the more I think she's the girl to save you from damnation. So we're off."

Julian scowled blackly, but otherwise ignored the accusation. "We leave with the rising of the Moon!"

WITHOUT incident, they reached the edge of that strange, unexplained natural phenomenon they had named the green spot. Julian saw no signs of the pygmies nor of their village. But he did find the little-used jungle path Kramer had mentioned. So they came to the limits of this Eden.

The green spot did end abruptly. At one point, jungle, the utter wilderness of the Calms in Earth's Trade Wind Belt. Then sparse vegetation, wind-blown grazed bushes, and fitful cold gusts which gave away after a few feet to blasting gales and complete desert. Against this wind they had to lean, keeping to their feet only by tenacity.

The terrain underfoot became hard, with the hardness of metal. An indeterminate distance away was an indistinct horizon, the area it bounded being a three-quarter circle of hostile greyness.

A few hundred feet of that and a low, solid structure arched up from and back into the ground, the waves of wind rolling over it. It was old, this structure, probably older than the memory of any inhabitant of the spot. The winds had pitted, scoured it with a cruel hand. Doors hung awry, stairs leading downward had crumbled under the timeless wind that poured down them. Everywhere was the evidence of disuse, of abandonment. And Julian felt a hard dismay. If there were civilized pygmies at the other pole, why didn't they make use of this depot, show some evidence that they occasionally made journeys back and forth? But the evidence pointed in the other direction—this terminal had not been in use for decades, perhaps centuries.

They followed the stairs down, went along a corridor which gradually turned into a steep ramp. Here they came to a broad platform, and Julian and Mercury stopped in mute wonder.

Twelve rails; eleven tear-drop-shaped cars, resting on the gleaming bright metal rods, which slanted on steep trestles down toward a wide compound.

The compound was fan-shaped, and the rails diverged from it, directly from the depot, and lost themselves in the murky distances that stretched beyond. Smooth, shining rails, threads of metal running away through uncharted distances, across a planet that howled with the devil's own blasts; ran across and ended at another depot at the opposite pole? Such seemed the truth, but the method of locomotion was yet a mystery.

"Twelve rails," Mercury muttered. "Eleven cars. Julian, it's the truth. Lascar's been here, and gone. And I hope he picked out a broken rail!"

Julian went slowly toward the cars, looking them over with a troubled eye. No engines, no outward signs of control. But there were several windows, made of a transparent metal which even Earth science had not discovered. Inside, a release lever, or such it must be. Tentatively, Julian laid hand on a panel, applied side-wise pressure. The panel, a door, slid smoothly open. Inside were seats, a round dozen, and it was evident that these cars had never been built for a big man like the pirate; nor a smaller like Mercury. Nonetheless, they could squeeze in.

Julian cocked an elevated eyebrow at Mercury. "Good as any, I'll say."

Mercury shuddered, looked down the steep trestle on whose lip the car rested. "Well, at least we know how she gets started. After that—" He wet his lips and mumbled something to himself and peered out at the misted horizon. There were no stars visible on that horizon, probably never had been. But there was a Moon, the other planet, and from all reports it would show itself, and soon.

Mercury came back to Julian shortly, said:

"Julian, it's a screw. I just figured it out."

Julian's dark brows went up in puzzlement. "What's a screw?"

"The whole damned planet's a screw!" said Mercury, sweating. "In a way, it's the most beautiful, most theoretically perfect problem in physics you ever saw. Look at those winds. They pursue a screw motion out from the equator toward the poles, and there aren't any mountains or lakes or oceans or any projecting features to break them up. In the low latitudes

they drop toward the ground, and screw themselves back up toward the equator again. Then they unscrew themselves.

"See what I mean? These rails. They do the same thing. They form the threads of a screw. The cars follow the threads. The planet goes around so damned fast, it slips the rails from under the cars. The cars keep on screwing in toward the equator. When they cross the equator, they unscrew themselves toward the other pole. It's that simple."

He lighted a mumbo weed, poured out great billows of the acrid yellow smoke. His eyes were glowing. "Those cars don't have any power of their own. The planet furnishes the power by letting the cars drop behind. It's beautiful, when you think about it."

JULIAN was caught by the picture himself. He stooped, rubbed his finger gingerly along the rail the car traveled. A short whistle of amazement came from his lips. His finger barely had the sensation of rubbing. That meant almost an entire lack of friction.

"Strange," he mused. "Now for the problem of the rising Moon. What would that have to do with it?"

Mercury shook his head in doubt. "Maybe got something to do with a broken rail. At the equator, or even in smaller latitudes, the planet can probably throw loose objects off into space. Seems to me the velocity of rotation at the equator is greater than the planet's velocity of escape. The rails act as a guide and also to keep the cars from escaping the planet. When you come to a broken place in the rails—" He shook his head in perplexity. "Superstition or not, maybe we better leave at the rising of the Moon anyway, eh?"

The Moon—the other planet—rose almost before he finished talking; and it rose so fast that it confessed the unbelievably swift rotation of its twin. This planet—a giant emery wheel, spinning madly, yet so cohesive in its construction that it could withstand the internal strains and stresses the axial velocity set up.

The two men sat hunched up in the front seat of the car they had chosen. Without preamble or prayer, Julian pulled the release lever—and motion came. The car started off with hardly a jerk, stood

poised for an infinitesimal second on the brink of the down-slide, then trundled off with a smooth roar of pointed nose against wind. At building velocity, it swept down the incline, until the rails on either side became blurs as they dropped behind. At the bottom of the slide, the car leveled with the effect of a suddenly stopping elevator, but its velocity was hardly affected. It shot like a bullet from the depot, abruptly was enclosed by the howling winds of the planet. It bored outward at incredible speed, reached the farthest horizon from the depot in a matter of short minutes, and then—accelerated.

Julian, sitting relaxed yet grim with foreboding behind the transparent plate fronting the car, took time to figure it out. They were a sensible distance from the green spot, one of the poles of the planet. They were moving toward the equator, following the path of decreasing latitudes. As the latitudes decreased, the rotational speed of the planet increased at that point, until the greatest speed was reached at the equator. Consequently, the planet continued to rotate swifter and more swiftly under the planetary car. Thus, acceleration.

Conversation dropped to a minimum as the minutes slid behind, but Julian's thoughts were going full blast, as his eye followed the rail ahead into the drab, hostile dusk. A broken rail—had Lascar inadvertently picked one? Had the car containing Julie been plummeted into open space, to become little less than a satellite, crammed with seven frozen corpses? He ground his teeth, felt a sharp, unaccustomed pang of loss at the thought. Julie meant nothing to him; nor he to her. Yet she stood out stark in his mind's eye, vital, filled with that rare, capricious *élan* which alone could affect his hardened senses. Sentiment he frowned upon, yet there was a pulse in his breast that was beating for Julie and Julie alone, that murmured her name in the same instant that it called him a weak fool. Inwardly he groaned, for he was seeing Julian Darnay as none had ever seen him before. Julian Darnay, strong, scornful, with his own brand of integrity, had tottered and there was a sniveling, fearing scarecrow. Julie Gunnardsen, Viking girl with the courage of steel and the inner softness of rare silks, had done this to him; and, he knew in his heart, it would

never be undone, though he lived to a thousand.

Behind them now, the rails were falling away with a slight humming ululation. The featureless plain was a blurred landscape and, because of the velocity, gave the impression of numberless straight lines speeding into the backward distance.

They could see the lower edge of the sister planet as it hovered overhead. It had risen swiftly, and Mercury calculated it was destined to set before they reached the equator.

An hour, two hours, three—and a new phenomenon set in. Sensation of a downward pull was extinguished. Any slight motion sent them floating toward the top of the car. Centrifugal force was acting to nullify gravity. Thusly they accelerated toward the equator, the Moon now touching the horizon, the *outré* landscape rolling away behind.

The Moon set, left behind hardly a sign that its light had in some measure made the radioactivity inherent in the planet's crust a shade brighter. The planetary car, product of the genius of an alien race long dead, flung itself at mounting velocities across the planet, in effect winding itself up along the thread of a giant screw. If that thread were broken—

It was broken. . . .

IT happened a trifling few moments after the equatorial crossing. That they had crossed was evident in that slight loss of speed which was to be sensed rather than calculated. And as if crossing the equator were the goal which guaranteed an intact rail, Julian gave a great sigh, and Mercury Bill's broad shoulders visibly relaxed. Optimism which proved unfounded.

Julian saw the break first—a bare hundred yards ahead. Beside him, he heard Mercury's breath suck in, and then seep out in a long, slow groan. Slowly, very slowly, he lowered himself back into his seat, his lips setting bitterly. He took a long, luxurious puff from his mumbo weed, which he had been nursing along for just this occasion, studied the blowing ash at the end, with profound regret, and accepted his fate.

Julian was not as passive. His teeth clamped hard, bit off curses, even as he lunged forward toward the release lever,

which could just as well act as a brake. He shoved it forward with smashing impact, held it by bracing his body against the seat, heard the scream of the brake as it wrapped a saw-fist around the smooth rail the car was riding.

In one second the pain of holding that broke in place raised beads of sweat over his whole body, strained his corded muscles to the breaking point. And for one second, he thought he might succeed, incredible as that would be. But as the car, not one whit disturbed, plunged along the rail toward its destiny, he knew that the strength of a hundred of those brakes would not stay that uncurbed velocity. They were doomed to hit the rupture in the rail.

It came incredibly fast, the last jagged inch of the rail, beyond which there was no more. The car swallowed the end of the rail in one convulsive gulp, and abruptly rose, a fantastic elevator gone wild. The floor of the car came up, smashed at Julian, at Mercury, threw them at the roof, tangled them into a human mixture of bruised arms and legs, threw them senseless from one end of the gyrating car to the other.

The car somersaulted, plunged without stop at a steep tangent to the planet which had flung it away like a discarded heap of refuse. It shot screaming through the stratosphere—up—up toward the vacuous gelidity of interplanetary space. . . .

On the world of the winds, there is what has been called the Sinkhole of Wind, at the bottom of which lies a large lake, the only such body on the planet. The lake lies very near that pole which is opposite the green spot, and onto it from the stratosphere straight overhead a veritable airflow pours. It is the Sinkhole.

Out near the edge of the stratosphere, a few thousand miles from the lake, was a somersaulting car. Normally it should have ascended straight into interplanetary space. Some mysterious force from outside reshaped its path, though, bent it, arched it down toward the planet it was disgorged from. It reached the super-wind belt of the lower stratosphere. Then air currents grasped it, hurled it horizontally.

The car moved with inconceivable speed. Wind screamed against its metallic flanks. The car was approaching the fabulous Sink-

hole, toward which every atom of air on this half of the planet was eventually drawn.

The car came to the brink of the Sink-hole. It was sucked over—sucked down; and its streamlined body was whipped into bullet position.

It fell, like a projectile hurled from the deeps of space. The lake came up, smashingly. The planetary car pierced its surface, bored a hole through it, a hole which closed up seconds later with a thunderclap. A geyser fountained for a hundred feet, was battered down by the force of descending air.

A minute after, the undamaged car, built to withstand the mauling, shot from the lake and dropped back. There it lay, rolling, heaving, with inanimate purposelessness jogging its occupants back to consciousness.

They sat in the car moments later, drooping, two human bundles of pain and near-broken bones. Julian shook his head, by main force of will raised his head and looked through the shattered quartzite of his helmet at the heavily rolling lake outside.

Mercury Bill emitted a shuddering sigh, studied the lake also.

"Well," he muttered weakly, "I guess the rising Moon worked its magic charm after all. How, I don't know."

JULIAN moved, eased himself groaningly to a new position.

"I guess I do know," he said, his voice reflecting the bruised exhaustion of his whole body. "Tidal influence."

"Tidal influence? How? The lake you mean?"

Julian sighed, shook his head. "Not the lake. The car. The Moon. Remember, just before we crossed the equator, the Moon had set. It was just below the horizon—just the right position to exert a gravitational influence on the motion of the car when the planet threw it off. It bent our path. Literally knocked our straight trajectory for a loop. We looped right back to the planet we came from, because the Moon's attraction put us below the velocity of escape. Then the wind got in its work again and we wound up here. On a lake. And I didn't think there were any such bodies on the planet. Well, give the builders of the transportation system credit.

The Moon was their safety factor, in case a rail broke or was already broken."

For a while, they gingerly tested bruised legs and arms, got the kinks out of their necks. Then the urgency of the situation, the desperation of their plight, was upon them again, and they worked their ways to the exterior of the car, where the cold winds howled down from the Sinkhole's lip. Wonder caught them, and their attention was abruptly riveted on the sure sign that this was not only the pole opposite the green spot, but the land where the civilized race live—or had lived. A city.

On the shores of the lake it stood, and followed the shores halfway around the lake, and stretched so far that its outskirts were lost to sight in the opacity of the air. It was a city that was made of color—a mosaic city delicate with all the hues and shades the eye can visualize. It sparkled, as if fluorescing under the impact of radioactive rays. None of the structures was tall—most were towered with frustrums, after the old Roman fashion, some domed, or pyramidal; and there was visual evidence that neither the Arabic nor the Gothic arches were unknown to these people.

Yet those buildings, some in obvious ruin, carried an appalling aura of age-old loneliness, as if the people who lived there would never be there again. As if they long since had died out. A slow chill of regret, and of pity, crept over Julian.

For awhile they shivered atop the ship. There lay the city, the civilization they sought. Yet, if it held nothing of intelligent life, who was to help them in their quest to find a means of crossing the billions of miles that separated them from the busy traffic of the interior planets?

No intelligent life? The corners of Julian's lips became hard, cruel. Lascar was there—five of his men—and Julie. That was almost certain.

Julian bestirred himself, stared darkly at the heavy waves that pushed poundingly against the shell of the car. "There's work to do now, Mercury," he muttered. "And little time to waste, if Lascar's intentions toward Julie are what I think. We have to reach shore. You're game to swim?"

"Swim?" Mercury laughed shortly. He had the true spacer's contempt and hatred of water, for water was fluid, tem-

peramental, displaceable, while space—well, space was one great dependable homogeneous solidity. "We won't have to swim. We're drifting shoreward."

It was true, and Julian's dark eyes glistened with anticipatory savagery. Another hour and they'd make land, and with whatever help the gods of space could bestow upon them, they'd find Lascar, meet out to him and his men the fate they deserved. No matter that he and Mercury were outnumbered. To think of failure was to think of death.

At any rate, it was a relief they didn't have to swim. *Or did they?*

The pirate's blood chilled. With a curse he shaded his eyes, strained them toward shore and verified the motion he saw. Figures, the figures of men. Human beings!"

He pointed a rigid finger, and Mercury gasped in consternation. "They're there," Julian said. "Waiting for us!"

Mercury paled, his homely face rock-hard. "Waiting for us is right," he groaned, and abruptly flattened on the top of the car. "They can't help but see the ship, and probably they see *us*. Damn! Well—"

He reached inside his shirt with haste, extracted a mumbo-weed. "At least, I can take *this* with me—"

Julian struck the weed from his hand. "No time for that, man! Off with your space suit. No help for it, we're going to have to get in the drink, whether you like it or not—"

Mercury protested in horror, but grimly Julian held his glance. "Sink or swim—which?" and as the corners of Mercury's lips pulled down in despair, he clapped the smaller man on the shoulder and laughed, richly. "This may be both swim *and* sink, Mercury, but at least you and I have had our fling. Now, off with our suits."

IT was more than a half hour before they felt the shock of those icy waters, however. Best to ride as far as they could—then take the plunge. At the last, they were forced to it, for one of Lascar's men had retrieved a large Hampton projectile-thrower from the wreck of the *Acheron*, let loose a sudden, cracking burst of gunfire. The explosive bullets hit the water scant inches ahead and behind the car, and without further protest Mercury slid down

the side of the car, went under. Julian followed, his great chest bursting with air as with powerful strokes he cleaved his way for twenty, perhaps thirty feet under the surface.

He broke water gently, rolled over, his long, aquiline nose barely protruding, his eyes sharp on the shore. Mercury came up beside him sputtering, blue-faced, and Julian gripped his arm in comradely fashion.

"Not much of this for us," he muttered. "Waves are carrying us shoreward as well as the car. Thing is, to land where the car doesn't. They're still waiting. They'll not think they did for us."

True enough, for now Lascar's group of men broke up, spread out along the water line, taking up a quarter mile of that dismal, rocky beach. Each carried a weapon of one kind or other—each was aoid to use it. And Julian could guess at their thoughts. Chances were that they were stuck here on this planet for years. But not alone. Each man coveted Julie, each man was willing to kill if that was necessary to possess her. And Julian and Mercury were the first obstacle to their desires.

Julian could guess how it was that Lascar happened to know of the fall of the planetary car. It was entirely probable that they had ridden a broken rail themselves, had plunged into this lake also. Lascar had therefore posted a couple of lookouts on opposite shores of the lake, and when the ship leaped out of the lake following its immersion, Lascar and his other men had come running. Now it was grim battle to the extinction of either party.

The strange tidal drag of the lake was a force to be reckoned with, Julian saw in the first few moments of swimming. Cut off at an angle though they would, the fact was frightening that they'd make shore in the very sight of those who sought to kill them.

"Damned tide," Mercury Bill gasped.

"The wind," said Julian. He laughed wryly. World of the winds, in all truth, and the two cultures of this world were the product of an amazing environment. At one pole, a green spot, calm as the Dol-drums of the middle Atlantic ocean on Earth. At the other pole a lake, creating

a climate harsh, cold, deadly to any but organized life.

For this lake did create climate, and it had created a civilization diametrically opposite that at the green spot. At the green spot, savages, living on the land, plucking the fruits and berries of the countless wild-growing trees and bushes—at the lake-pole, a civilized city, scientific to the ultimate, shielded from the elements. The people of the lake-pole had constructed the transportation system—that was certain. They had had to progress, because only in scientific achievement could they war against the cruel climate that could so easily destroy them.

And treading water, looking across at the city, Julian felt dismay. He felt in his heart that the pygmies of the lake-pole *were* dead, and that the climate had been the deciding factor in their deaths. For two centuries they had not visited the green spot. It sounded like proof enough. And it meant that for those who sought to escape the planet there would be no help—no hope.

How did the lake create climate? Julian reasoned it out. Land radiates heat faster than water, so there was a constant shift of air from the lake toward land. This in turn created a low-pressure area over the lake which sucked huge volumes of air from the cold stratosphere. Thus the Sinkhole, thus the gelid blasts that eternally smashed at the city, at the land for miles around. An endless process.

The green spot was different. It was an Eden, and there was no need for progress, for science; there was nothing to fight. Yet the green spot was less explained than the lake-pole, for what strange barrier was it that shielded it from the savagery of the winds beyond its miraculously clean-cut limits?

"Julian!" Mercury's low voice came, and Julian's eyes instantly snapped in the direction of his pointing finger. Instinctively, he sank deeper. They were drifting toward a peninsula of black, fluorescent basalt jutting jaggedly from shore.

On the very lip of the rock one of Lascar's men paced; a thin, nervous fellow, head jerking in the quick, thalamic movements of a bird as he studied the lake surface, pistol to the ready in his hand.

FOR a few moments more the two men dealt out with their arms, vainly trying to make headway against the water's push. Finally, seeing one truth clearly, Julian edged up to Mercury.

"We're in for it," he snapped. "No use butting our heads against walls like a trapped fly buzzing in a window sash. This is a thing to think about—*now*. Sixty feet to that rock—can you make it under water?"

Mercury was miserable with cold and wet. "Can't," he moaned. "Those mumbo weeds have ruined my breath and left me with gasps and wheezes."

"Let that teach you a lesson," Julian growled, for he had never approved of Mercury's fanatic use of the Titanian tobacco. "Never mind, then. Fight back against the shore current, leave the rest up to me."

"Luck," Mercury gasped, and Julian swelled his chest, breathed one unaccustomed prayer, and went under.

A minute, two minutes, three. He speared the water with the full strength of his mighty arms and legs, black hair streaming, nostrils, lips and face muscles hardening as the torture of holding his breath increased. A great engine, pistons working, seemed to have gone into action in his windpipe, a machine which worked toward the single diabolical end of thrusting his precious store of air through mouth and nose against his iron will. Heaven to draw one breath, heaven to convince himself that he had traversed the full distance, heaven to break the surface! Reason screamed out its warning, while his emotional self beat a crazy clamor on the door which shut out relief. Rise now? *Now?* No!

Yet he must.

There was a place where endurance died—and rose from its own ashes. There was a place where life itself seemed less valuable than the death air would bring—and life fought victoriously. And there was a place where battle of that sort ended—and he went up.

Afterward, the sound of his lungs gorging themselves as he cleaved that dark, rolling surface seemed as loud as the mouth-thunder of a surfacing whale. He lay unseen on the surface, however, in an agony of returning life. Lascar's man

was pacing almost straight above him.

After awhile his sharp eyes scanned the vertical surface of the shore-tooth, surveying his chance. A handhold here, and one above it—good enough. In moments he was plastered above the water, chilled to the marrow. There was little time to think of that, though, even on the greater significance of his fight—to find Julie, to help her in her avowed task to feed a radium-hungry Earth, to escape this planet.

How these things were to be accomplished was of the uncertain future; but that they were to be accomplished he had long since decided—if he lived.

There was boldness in his actions now, but it was boldness leavened with accelerated caution. A final flexing of muscles sent him vaulting over the brink onto the flat surface of the abutment, where his knees and then his soggy, booted feet took his full weight. Lascar's man stood facing the lake. Then, a moment to rake the shore for signs of danger, another moment to throw himself forward.

He with the flame pistol sensed his plight. Too late, though. He got the weapon up only to see it smashed aside, sent spinning into the lake by one brute blow of Julian's hand. The rest was aftermath—a grunt, a blow, a thud, and Julian had the fellow flat down, throat transfixed.

"Steady now," he murmured. "Quiet. You'll take death or life? Choose!"

He relaxed his hold, and Julian saw then the man was shaking in an agony of fright. Julian recognized him now—Fox Dowle they called him, one of Julie's electricians aboard the *Spacehound*. Foxlike he was, with thin pointed face and a terror of the hound who had him. He was careful to make no outcry.

Julian made a motion toward the lake. Shortly, Mercury dragged himself completely exhausted to a belly-position on the ledge. Julian turned back to his captive.

"You'll take us to Captain Gunnarsen, wherever he keeps her?"

Dowle whimpered, nodded. Julian said curtly, "Fair enough. And my promise is that if you hew to the line, you'll rove the spacelanes again while men like Lascar are rotted away."

This was twilight, this half of the world, and the blasts riding in from the lake carried their own quota of hazy moisture.

Yet, far up the shore one could see Lascar's next lookout; and that worked both ways, for suddenly, as these three, one a captive, walked quickly toward the city across the eroded shore, this lookout cried sharply:

"Dowle! You're leaving? What's the matter?"

His voice came clear, from three hundred yards away.

Dowle faltered as Julian gripped his arm. He called back: "Who cares? They're dead and you know it."

The man was coming this way at a dead run, now. He halted abruptly, then raised his Hampton and let loose three short bursts, misses all. And now the weapon was apparently empty. But then a small pocket derringer appeared in his hand, cracked out with greater clarity, both of sound and of meaning. It was not an aimed shot. It was a signal to Lascar, and it was effective, for abruptly there were answering shots.

"Well," Mercury Bill said with singular calm, "they've got us spotted, all right," but the words were hardly out of his mouth before Julian grabbed the arm of the man called Dowle and shoved him ahead, with a snarled threat:

"You know your business, now! Take us to Julie. Before Lascar gets there, too."

They ran full pace, across that eroded, rocky beach, under a sky that had never beheld humans. And one thing seared Julian's mind. Their heavy flame pistols had been discarded along with their space-suits. They were weaponless! Defenseless against the death closing in on them—unless their wits could be put to work.

IN a few moments the city rose around them. They settled to a dogged, jogging pace and Dowle seemed faithful enough to his promise, for a sick look of fear continued to mar his thin face. All in all, he was a ferret of a man, and one constriction of Julian's arm could have ended him.

But the city! Julian felt his hopes sink to the bottom of a pit. The city was empty, dead, and though the body of it was left, time and weather and perhaps war had left parts of the skeleton exposed or rotted. Of life there was none. Of the builders, of the little people—no sign. What catas-

trophe had struck them in centuries long gone no man could say. Perhaps no man would ever know. But the realization that they *were* dead struck him cruelly. Here went the chances of leaving the planet, even of communicating with Earth.

Behind them, somewhere, Lascar's men, fierce on their trail. Ahead, Julie. Well, at least that part of their goal would be accomplished, for now Dowle ascended a ramp for three flights, into the interior of a four storied building.

"This is it," he muttered briefly, and indifferently gestured at a door.

"Open it!"

As indifferently, Dowle obligingly forced twisted metal plate on its hinges, clattered through, Julian on his heels. And across the room Julie was just turning from a window near which she had been standing, her lips parted in fear. She evidently expected the arrival of Lascar, and when she saw Julian she seemed to wilt, her whole face grew pinched and white, and she sank to the bare floor, and buried her face in her hands, her shoulders moving in jerky, unuttered sobs.

A LUMP in his throat, Julian hauled her erect, both hands on her shoulders as he held her at arm's length.

"Tears, Julie?" he laughed. "Over me? I never expected *that* day to come!"

She raised her head, and there were tears, a bare sparkle on her eyelashes.

"I'd about given up hope," she said simply. "Lascar said you and Mercury were dead. This makes things simpler. That is," she added hastily, "I trust him a good deal less than I do you."

Julian smiled wryly, said, "You never would admit to my face before that there was any good in me, would you, Julie? Never mind. The situation—"

"Hold it!" Mercury snapped. "Think we've got time to have a pot of tea, too? We don't—not at all. Look at the chain around her ankle."

Julian paled, studied the thick rusted length of links, and whirled on Dowle. "Know how to loosen that? Got a key? Open it!"

The chain was fastened with a small double-strength padlock which someone must have drawn from his space-kit. Dowle muttered, hung his head.

"Remember your promise," he said sulkily.

Julie said quickly, "Dowle, your life is yours. Your future, too, if you'll get that stupid lock off your face and unlock this padlock. You know Lascar's got one key—I saw you palm the other. Now quick!"

And Dowle stooped over the chain. Julie apprehensively said, "You think Lascar is headed here?"

Julian gave an urgently brief synopsis of events, finished as Dowle stood up and Julie stepped out of the loosened band which had bound her ankle. Dowle said nervously, "Come on. What are we waiting for? If Lascar ever catches up with me—" He was whining. "After all I have to look out for myself, too."

Julian ignored him, went to the barred window. He took the bars in his great hand, shook three of them loose, for the cement which held them tight had deteriorated to rottenness. He stuck his head out, saw a roof a scant few feet below.

"Out that way?" Mercury demanded incredulously.

"Out *that* way. No time to go back to the street now—chances are they're coming up the ramp. Julie—you first, Mercury, then Dowle. I'll follow."

By the time Julie dropped lightly to the roof, Mercury Bill had a mumbo weed going and his spirits were reviving. Julian looked at him in disgust. "I was hoping those things would be soaked rotten."

Mercury grinned. "Hell, Julian, they've got an oil base. They *shed* water." He went on through the window, and was ready to take Dowle in tow when he came down. As Dowle dropped, Julian went pad-footed toward the door, stuck his head out. He heard soft, urgent, approaching footsteps—a body of them, and for a second pondered. A frown grew between his eyes, then he, too, went through the window.

The four passed from that roof to another, but they were still in plain sight of the tower which had held Julie, and could find no obstacle to cut off that sight. Thus it was that the first shot came—and it was a shot that struck. Dowle doubled up with a scream, fell flat on his face, rolled onto his back.

He looked up at Julian with suffering eyes. He was holding his hand to his

upper hip. Fright mingled with the pain showing on his face. "You can't leave me here," he said. "Your promise!"

JULIAN said nothing, merely hefted the wounded man to his shoulder, set off grimly after the other two, and Dowle's head lolled suddenly in unconsciousness. Yet he was breathing.

More shots came, but they dropped to a lower roof, and Julian, despite his thin burden, led the way at a quick run. What their goal, their purpose, was hard to say, and yet they had to lose themselves, had to have time to prepare to fight back. But weaponless, that was a large order.

Suddenly Julie gave a shout. She had almost stumbled into a roof opening, a ramp that fell downward at a steep angle. Julian nodded jerkily for them to go ahead, and followed, an explosive projectile from the Hampton shattering part of the roof ahead of him.

Below, it was fairly dark, but there was a natural fluorescent radiance coming from the very walls. They moved at quick pace up a narrow corridor.

"Might be a blind alley," Julie panted, as they were forced to turn at right angles. She hesitated, but the cry behind them, "There they are, Zeeman!" drove her forward.

Intuition, clairvoyance, whatever, Julie was right. Mercury Bill turned an astounded face on Julian as they stood looking at the blank wall. "By the Lord," he almost shouted, "it *is* a blind alley!"

Gently, yet swiftly, Julian placed his unconscious burden on the floor, made three quick turns around the wall. No opening—neither door nor window. Once he made certain of that, he whirled toward the main corridor, whipped his space-jacket from around his massive shoulders. He heard padding footsteps, and an advance guard suddenly came into view, near the cornice of the angle turn. Julian swung the jacket in an underhanded circle, the collar at the end. The collar came under the wrist of the cutthroat—the wrist of the right hand where the gun was held. Neatly, the gun was detached from the man's hand, the jacket completed its circle and Julian had a gun.

Surprise was the major motif of the other's expression. He gaped at his empty

hand—and Julian fired. Or at least he depressed the trigger. There was no answering shot, but by that time Lascar's man was flying for his life. Amazed, Julian inspected the weapon, saw that his impromptu net had thrown on the safety catch. Well, no matter. He had a weapon, and, if nothing else, stalemate would result, rather than swift encirclement.

Julie and Mercury came crowding around him. Julie's eyes shone. "We needed a gun." She took it gingerly. Her face fell. She looked up at Julian helplessly. "It's only got three charges left."

Julian swore softly as he clicked the atomo-chamber around with a blunt thumb. Mercury expelled his breath in a disappointed sigh, but Julian, in an afterthought, shrugged. "What difference? They know we've got a weapon now, and three charges are still good for three deaths."

"But they know we're trapped here, too, in the short arm of an L-corridor," Mercury offered sourly. "The mister you disarmed had a chance to see that."

"Darnay!"

Julian spun, lips drawing back from his teeth. "Well, Lascar?" he called in return. For it was Lascar who had spoken, his voice a hollow echo traveling down the corridor.

Lascar said sarcastically, "Let's don't play this game too long, Darnay. Dead you're no good to me—alive we might do business. What's your answer to that?"

"Well, the answer is: dead you *are* good to me. Let that be answer enough."

Lascar snorted. "You're trapped there. Even with a short-loaded gun, you don't dare come out—as we don't dare to come in. You'll starve, I promise."

"And your promises don't mean much. Choose your own course of action and be damned!"

That ended the conversation, and Julie bluntly asked. "What's *your* course of action?"

Julian smiled, and the smile illumined his whole dark face. "At present, inaction—rest—quiet. We have it to spare, for the moment. And it gives me a chance to talk with you."

Off to one side, Mercury stood. Suddenly, Julian put his hands in his pockets, pursed his lips and with exaggerated

nonchalance piped a soft tune and wandered to the rear of the corridor, where, presumably, he was out of earshot.

Julie flinched at his direct look, something of pain, and of lost uncertainty, rising in her shadowed eyes. "What about, Julian?" she whispered.

"About your father, Julie. About the Moon-cache."

Her eyes shifted. She blinked rapidly. Her fingers came together, nervously. Her voice was low. "I was going to ask you about that, Julian. Please don't think me a fool—or perhaps I was . . . Julian," she said with a burst of desperation, "I know now it couldn't be true, not what Dad said. Or else you weren't to blame. I've learned things about you, the way you picked up Dowle—"

His eyebrow arched. "Old feuds are old feuds, Julie. Let them die and receive burial. This is the ceremony we must go through, the hot words we've passed, and my explanation now is the closing speech before the body is laid to rest."

THE story itself he cut short. The Moon-cache, of course, was a ton or two of platinum which had been stored on the Moon to maintain a balance of credit between Venus and Earth. Julie's father had it that the cache was unguarded, and intended to raid it.

Julian made a scornful mouth. "Your dad was a fish swallowing bait. The Old Guard was out to get him. I argued with him, but once his mind got set into a mold, diamonds wouldn't cleave it. So—" he flushed a little, "—I was young, and thrills were the stuff of life anyway, so I went ahead and raided the cache myself."

His shoulders squirmed at her direct, waiting stare.

"Nothing much to it, I guess. Of course, it was a fight. Half my crew died, and I've got an unsightly red scar on my leg, but that's the game. I had the fastest ship in the system and some weapons your father didn't. That gave me the edge. Your father went crazy mad, pulled a flame pistol on me. As I say, I was young, he was getting up in years, and I beat him to the draw. His hand went up in smoke. So he hated me."

"What happened to the platinum?"

He grew increasingly nervous, tried to cover it with a laugh. "It found a good home."

"On Earth," Mercury said, suddenly stepping up. "Sorry, Julian, I couldn't help hearing this, and give credit where credit is due. Julie, Julian dropped the platinum in front of the Earth treasury, and later on sent them a radiogram advising them to be more careful about letting loose change lie around. He was afraid of a financial panic, people losing their homes, their savings."

Julian's eyes stormed at him. "Don't be a fool. I was afraid a financial panic would send interplanetary shipping into a tailspin—and that was my livelihood. Now let that be an end to it, Julie—Mercury."

"An end to it." She laughed unsteadily. "It could be a beginning. . . . Well, all right." Her voice was very soft, and as if a subtle metamorphosis had worked on her, a deep glow was in her eyes. "End it if you want, for now, Julian, but I think it was a magnificent bit of unselfishness. Now what?"

He knew she had deliberately changed the subject, for she could see his embarrassment; and the change was to his liking. He pointed to a grating half a body-length over his head. "Ventilator duct, if anything," he said tersely. "If there's escape for us, it lies there. Mercury, your shoulders," and seconds later he was standing in precious balance at the grating. It was secured with a simple kind of rust-proof pinch-clamp. The grating came loose, and without a word he was in the tunnel revealed, crowding in choking dust.

Light faded, pure darkness engulfed him. The duct turned once, twice, and then there was another grating. It, too, came loose. Beyond that, he found an L-turn, but it was two or three feet long, was buttressed by a grating that would hardly have admitted his hand when he got it loose. He crawled back, followed the main duct. He was startled to hear voices, suddenly was looking downward through the grating at Lascar and his men.

Lascar was pacing angrily.

"We have to ferret them out," he snapped. "They're ruining my whole plan. We don't dare spend a waking moment without fear if they go free. If we wait

too long for them to starve, we will, too."

One man said sulkily, "If we'd had any brains, we'd have stayed at the other pole. We had the girl then."

Lascar stared him down with pale eyes, then resumed his pacing, nibbling at a sensuous lower lip.

Julian frowned. He couldn't open this grating from the inside, nor could he shoot through it or blast it loose—not when he needed the charges for battle afterward. His jaw clamped. Abruptly he turned, crawled back, stuck his head through and startled Mercury by saying, "Mercury, I'll take one of your mumbo weeds."

"Huh?" Mercury's eyes grew big. But he gulped, tossed one up. Julian scraped the tip along the wall. The weed burst into flame. He stuck it into his mouth at a rakish angle, grinned through the free corner of his mouth and was gone again, a cloud of exhaled smoke behind him.

LASCAR paused in his pacing, thin nostrils dilating in a sniff.

"What's that smell?" he said sharply. Then his face lighted. "Mumbo weed!"

"This Mercury Bill smokes 'em like mad," one of the men offered.

"I know that! But where's it coming from? It's strong, too damned strong to come from around the corridor."

He stiffened, ran his eyes around, then fixed his glance on the grating overhead, which he had apparently seen for the first time. From the grating, strands of an acrid yellow smoke were drifting.

Galvanized, the men watched that tell-tale sign. Lascar said softly, "They're at the end of that ventilator shaft—or else in it, making an escape. You, Farmen—game to get up there and look around?"

Farmen was big, confident. He shrugged his shoulders, and the others flattened themselves against the wall under the grating while Farmen stood on a pair of shoulders and brought the grating loose. He hefted himself up, paused cautiously and went in, flame pistol at the ready.

In the shaft, grinning, Julian smoked, and backed up like a crab as Farmen came on. Then he went fast, and at the short L-turn into the duct, shoved the mumbo weed through the small grating, heard it

strike the dust on the other side. Noiselessly, he went backward through the next aperture in the main duct, lifting the grating back into place, secured it.

Farmen followed the scent of the mumbo weed like a hound. He missed the L-turn, fumbled up against the grating behind which Julian crouched. He turned back to the L-turn. Julian could almost hear him sniffing. Then he went back to Lascar. His voice, fairly clean, came drifting back:

"There's another grating about fifteen feet down, but it's closed from the other side. Smoke wasn't coming from there anyway." He explained the L-turn. "I figure they aren't in the duct itself. Mercury Bill, so they say, smokes like mad. This smoke is being sucked through that little grating clear from where we've got 'em trapped."

Lascar was impatient. "Couldn't you get through? This is our chance to surprise 'em from above."

Farmen's voice was heavy, irritated. "I was going to tell you. We'll have to use a flame gun and burn our way through. But I can't handle 'em alone. There's four of them, including Dowle."

"That rat," somebody growled. "He's probably thrown in with them. He might be dead, though."

"We can't take chances anyway, when Darnay's got a gun," Lascar said. "All right, you three men get up there with Dowle, follow through with him. Don't forget about Julie. She's to be taken alive."

One of the men laughed heavily. "Don't worry."

Lascar was planning to stay in the corridor, hold off escape from that direction. Which, Julian thought, was all to the good.

He went back, stuck his blackened head through the opening, spoke lowly. "Give me your hand, Mercury."

He helped Mercury through the duct opening. He gave Mercury the gun. "Those three are your meat, I'll take care of Lascar barehanded. You can handle 'em!"

Mercury looked at him. "Since when couldn't I handle any three men?"

Julie was looking up in nervous alarm. "Where do I come in?"

"You," said Julian, "will stay here and

keep the ghosts of the dead pygmies company."

"Julian—" she began desperately, starting forward, one hand upraised. Then she averted her eyes. "I'll wait."

Halfway down the duct, Julian held Mercury back, then edged slowly up to the grating. Through the grating, they could see Farnen and two others, plainly visible in the flare of a tuned-down flame pistol. They were using the pistol for a burner, cutting away a hole big enough to get through.

"We'd could let the grating down and wing 'em through here," Mercury suggested.

"And let our main bird fly away?"

Ten minutes passed. Then there was a clanging, thumping sound as the metal bulkhead fell free. The flame went out. After a few moments, Julian let the grating down, moved through, whispered, "Luck!" to Mercury, and left him at the L-turn, to follow his own devices. Mercury's prey had entered the newly-opened duct.

Julian quietly crawled along, until he saw the opening. He edged cautiously closer, saw the top of Lascar's head, then his eyes. Lascar was standing against the farther wall, looking upward at the duct opening one second, then down the corridor toward where he thought his quarry was trapped, and back again. He was nervously holding a small Hampton.

Julian frowned. Lascar had the advantage here. How come to grips with him without receiving an explosive bullet through the head? He waited in growing alarm, unable to act, and the minutes stretched away.

Then he heard a voice that congealed his blood.

"All right, Lascar. If I'm what you want, here I am. I'm giving myself up."

Julie's voice, weary, beaten. And Lascar whirled toward her, his eyes growing big. "Julie!"

HER approaching footsteps, slow, icily sure, sounded down the corridor. Lascar stood as if caught by a paralysis. Then he jerked, like a man awakened harshly from a deep sleep.

"Stay there, Julie!" His gun came up. He was breathing heavily, as if he were

torn by a dozen conflicting doubts. His gun hand trembled. He blurted, "*Stay there!* Good God, Julie, what are you trying to do to me? I don't like this. You don't intend to give yourself up—not you. It isn't in you—"

His jaw dropped with horrified comprehension. "It's a trick. God, that mumbo smoke—"

He wrenched the words from his contorted lips. He realized in that moment the manner of his betrayal, for even as he pressed the trigger of the Hampton, clearly intending to kill her where she stood, he sensed the human juggernaut that flung itself from the ventilator duct. The shot sounded out, and the second came a bare moment later, as he fired pointblank at his assailant.

In mid-air, pain burst through the side of Julian's head, but no matter. This was a thing that had to be done. Julie had sensed the stalemate that existed between him and Lascar, and in her heart she had seen the one solution, though she knew that Lascar might well see through the ruse. Lascar's attention had been distracted, and the opportunity Julian had vainly sought was there. A pity he hadn't taken full advantage of Julie's diversion before Lascar had regained his balance.

One shot was all Lascar could manage. Julian smashed into him, slammed him against the wall, spread-eagled him there as he sought to gain control of the gun. Vainly. Lascar wrenched free and they were abruptly a mixture of arms and legs. Lascar was below for the first half of that battle, a battle that was solely and simply one for possession of Lascar's Hampton. Successfully, Julian held off the use of it, but it cost him his balance and he found himself flat on his back, the Hampton slowly working around toward him.

Strange how he was aware of his surroundings, even in the heat of fight. Mercury had trapped Lascar's three men, for now there were two more shots—a third, a fourth. And Lascar's men were throwing a returning fire. There were shouts, curses, coming from the duct as from a megaphone, and in its way the commotion was ludicrous, halfway impossible in that city of the long-dead.

And, from the corner of his eye, he saw Julie. She was little more than a heap

of flesh in the corridor. Lascar's bullet had found her then. And this, more than anything, lent a new strength to his muscles, a new hate to his emotions. He allowed Lascar to strain the gun into position, barrel pointed at his head. Lascar pressed the trigger, but Julian deliberately shoved the gun away the few inches that were necessary.

Unconsciously, seeing success, Lascar had relaxed. He was dumbfounded when the pointblank shot missed. Julian brought a loose knee up, caught him hard across the chest and literally flung him for half a dozen feet. He was there when Lascar rolled over and fired again. But even Lascar knew it was too late, that any advantage he had had dissipated itself. Julian caught him by one arm and one leg—and that was the end of it.

He threw Lascar out, swung him by an ankle. The traitor's head snapped hard against the wall.

There was a clearly audible cracking sound.

Lascar fell, lay relaxed.

Breathing heavily, a red haze clouding his vision, Julian stood over Lascar. But Lascar didn't move. He was dead. Dead as this city.

After a while, strangely dizzy, Julian turned back to Julie. He knelt beside her, grasped her hand. It was warm. She was alive. Around her head were bits of chipped masonry. And Julian saw what had happened. Lascar's shot had gone wild, struck the wall, ricocheted pieces of a strange luminescent hard stuff off. One of the large pieces had struck her. But not fatally.

She stirred, opened her eyes, sat up. Abruptly, she was completely aware. Her eyes fastened on Lascar. "Dead?" she whispered.

"Dead."

"Mercury?"

"I don't know—"

"Good enough, Julian," a dry voice interrupted. Julian whirled with relief, saw Mercury's completely dust-blackened head sticking from the duct. Clouds of mumbo weed smoke erupted from his grinning mouth. He dropped lightly to the corridor.

"And who was it said mumbo weeds weren't healthy?" he demanded.

A MOMENT to remember, this. The main battle won—a big problem still ahead—but life still theirs. Julian gripped the smaller man's hand in heartfelt gladness. Then abruptly he sagged, and Mercury caught him. With a cry, Julie was on her feet, handkerchief in hand. Blood had poured from the side of his head in quantities, but already the wound was congealing.

Mercury said in dismay, "Half your ear is gone."

"Well, it's nothing that a plastic surgeon can't fix," Julian grinned weakly.

Julie said, "Julian, Lascar had it all figured out. He was—"

Mercury broke in, "You mean the problem of the green spot?"

Julian said patiently, "You were saying, Julie—"

But Mercury, smoking and enjoying life, said imperturbably, "It came to me while I was polishing those roughnecks off. This green spot. They had to cut their way through another narrow spot in the corridor—guess the mumbo weed you dropped in there got choked up in the dust—and I picked two of them off in the light the flame pistol was throwing off. While I was doing that I was thinking about the green spot. That green spot is the center of a hurricane."

Both Julian and Julie stared.

"The absolute, bull's-eye center of the hurricane," Mercury repeated, relishing the statement. "A hurricane is a spiraling system of wind. The wind spirals around a center. The center is dead calm. Ask anybody. So's the other half of this planet a spiraling system of wind—a hurricane, too. The green spot is the dead calm center. Satisfied?"

"Satisfied?" Julian echoed. He was frankly amazed. Here was a planet that had revealed secret after secret, a fantasy of a planet, yet one which operated according to the strictest kind of logic. First the wind system itself, then the transportation system, the tidal influence of the Moon, the broken rail, the lake—and now the green spot explained, an untroubled paradise existing at the dead center core of the most systematic, most purely violent wind-storm the universe had ever seen or would see.

Julie rubbed the swelling on her head

with distaste. She said musingly, "I guess when the scientists get here from Earth they'll go wild. Not only because of the planet, but because of what the little people who used to live here left behind."

Julian came erect. "What *did* they leave behind?"

"Machines," said Julie. "That's what I was going to tell you. Lascar found that most of the city was underground. It's filled with machines, with laboratories, with foundries. They've been protected from the elements, and a little tinkering will set them in motion again. There are even generators which could generate electricity with water piped down from the lake."

Mercury's blunt fingers snapped. "Hell! We can build a small model of the *Acheron* and get back to Earth."

"Big enough for the three of us," Julie added. "Dowle died, you know. And we can take back some radium. Yes," she said, seeing Julian's open stare, "radium. There's tons of it, isolated in pure form in lead canisters. That's why Lascar was so dead set on getting rid of you two, so he could build another ship using the *Acheron's* super-drive unhindered. That radium—why it meant more riches than a man can dream of."

She stopped.

"Julian," she said lowly, "would you want to go back to Earth—for good?"

He flung her a taunting grin, stooped and jerked Lascar's Hampton from his stiffening hand. He faced her again. "With you, Julie? A home on a hill-top?"

HER small hands turned into sudden fists, her face grew red. But she said steadily, "You've a terrific conceit, Julian. I'll overlook it. What I mean is, Earth needs men like you. You and your father before you were scientific geniuses. Your father died and men only cursed him and then forgot him. You can choose another path and become one of the immortals."

Her expression, her voice, became so intense toward the last that he was caught off balance. He tried in vain to put derision on his face, but all he could get out of it was a stubborn scowl. He felt help-

less in the face of this damning new idea. He glanced toward Mercury, but Mercury was looking at him without humor.

"She's on the right track, Julian," the older man said.

Julian was dumbfounded. He grew cold inside. Mentally, Mercury had deserted him—and it was as if the structure of space itself had collapsed. It was as if he were already on Earth, and the grim horizons, so near, hung around him. A net in which he was trapped; constricting him; choking him. While space, with its infinite variety of thrills, of action, of life, beckoned to him with an imperative hand—and he was unable to answer the call!

An explosive, angered curse tore from his mouth. Next thing he knew, he was striding down the corridor, away from those two, his feet pounding, his thoughts keeping mad pace with his feet. Around him rose the walls of the corridor where so many tiny living feet had trod. Feet that were still now, and forgotten, as he would someday be still and forgotten.

He stopped in mid-stride. Suddenly, he saw himself and the universe in a new perspective—and the picture was clear. He gave a great shout of laughter, turned—and there was Julie.

He took her shoulders in his great hands, held her at arm's length, while she smiled faintly, as if at a secret.

His voice was deep, rich with this new humor. "Julie, I'll never get the longing for space out of my bones, but there's a new longing now—a new world you've opened for me. A new world without a horizon. Understand?"

A new world, the world of science and research. Adventures there to rival the bloodiest to be found in the space lanes. This he knew to be the truth, for how long does it take a thought to land on a star? How long for an idea to explore the minutest electron? How long for the imagination to ride an equation to the farthest limits of time itself?

Julie understood, and as he drew her closer to him, half roughly, half tenderly, she understood another truth. The new world of Julian Darnay, bad man of the space lanes, was to be her world also; his pains and joys hers. And this was the way she wanted it.

Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress

By BRYCE WALTON

The silver sphere bobbed beside the Brain. It began to glow, and suddenly to expand, and I felt myself drawn toward it. Then I became part of it, part of the heat and brightness and whirling, and I could feel myself melting away — until I became nothing . . .

THERE are all kinds of men labeled with all sorts and degrees of psycho tags. For what it's worth, I have always been primarily motivated by an insatiable urge for action.

I have always awakened with faculties sharp and eyes clear, ready for any emergency of which there are plenty in these chaotic years of social adjustment from the Twentieth to the Twenty-fifth Century. This awakening I knew would exceed in magnitude any I had known. I knew I was in a place to which the little alien man had brought me.

I was stretched out on a smooth cold table of metal. I was also aware of a contraction of unknown purpose clamped about my skull, and my entire store of bodily faculties seemed vitally prepared for any eventuality, as though steeling itself for a subconsciously preconceived super-human effort.

I still hesitated about opening my eyes. It wasn't from physical fear which I have learned to convert into mental and physical energy. There was a fear of that alienness. Alien was the word for the little man with the bulbous head and crinkled little face of a premature child.

I knew that his outer dress and hairless, swollen and blue-veined skull, and the invisible electronic force that had brought us here, were all of some other time, world, dimension, or something of all three.

It wasn't exceptional on my part to be thinking of such fantastic possibilities in such a calm and detached a manner. Nothing seems fantastic anymore to a Twenty-fifth Centurian. Nothing. What we have not actually seen practiced through the

marvels of chemistry and electronics, we have been trained to believe possible. We have two great goals facing us around the corner of probability—an Elixir of Life from some bio-chemical laboratory, and a ship constructed for an ultimate landing on a distant star.

But first, we must readjust the various political factions which prevent integration of human potential.

The last effort is the gigantic one. All other sciences have advanced beyond the science of society which is still infantile, but learning to walk more or less alone. The goal of global social integration is in sight, but the battle will still be long and difficult. This all leads to the body of this story—to the World-City of Mohlin, to which the Scientist, Draken, brought me, brought me for the fulfillment of a grandiose and necessary, but horribly destructive destiny.

When the Fascisti wormed their way underground after their crushing defeat by the forces of World Democracy, after the close of that episode of evolutionary birth pangs called World War II, they created a small, evil and powerful recalcitrant force of reaction, seeking to regain minority control over the Earth Mass. Their threat is their secrecy. They never work openly; they are too small in number; but their acts of sabotage and political intrigue is disheartening at times, and a constant threat to our Administrative balance.

As elected Commander of the International Secret Police, my sole duty is to combat the specially trained cult of saboteurs of our democratic World-State, the Black Spartans.



Illustration by MURPHY

Somehow that night—I've never been able to find the leak—two of them gained the top of my apartment building and were hiding on the roof landing as I stepped out to enter my jet-car.

THERE was no warning, no challenge. Their aim was simply to burn me out. Some well-trained intuitive sense threw me in a long dive forward and sidewise as the shaft of deadly heat crackled past and smoked beside my outstretched hand.

My E-special blaster was out and ready even as I hit the fine plastic mesh of the roof. I twisted over and burned a swath in their direction. I came up to one knee, keeping their area lanced with rays, then to my feet, going to one side and trying to distinguish their black plastic suits from the shadows.

A form stumbled out of the thick dark. It was half bent forward, grasping its middle. I smelled scorched flesh and knew he must be mortally injured, but I couldn't afford to underestimate the fanatical power of a Spartan.

He was still coming at me, so I burned him again, watched him crumble and sag. That was an error. The other Spartan, who was still somewhere back in the shadows of the collonade, blasted my arm, burning it half through. I watched my fingers curl and my E-special fall out and away slowly as in a dream.

There wasn't pain, physical pain. There was sheer mental anguish as I visualized myself closing my career of duty for the World-State, a failure. I knew what they wanted with my corpse. Dead, my cerebrum would be removed, activated, and its mental storage released through electronic recorders the Spartan scientists had developed. They preferred a brain taken from death as there was no slightest difficulty from conscious or even subconscious resistance.

But the Spartan couldn't burn me without a parting voice.¹ His egomania demanded that I see and hear the power that had defeated me. He came out of the shadows, a black muscled melodramatic outline.

"Goodby," he slurred in a thick accent. "For a reputed great man, you employ pathetic guards. Your force is growing weak and negligent, Allinger. Soon our

long wait and our long fight will reach its victorious end, even as you reach your shameful end now."

The Spartan tensed his blaster and I leaped straight into it, desperately, because I had nothing to lose.

I never got to him, and his blaster never got to me. I hit something painfully and bounced off. My arm was a lump of burning agony as I thudded to the roof, stunned by an impact with an invisible barrier.

The Spartan was discharging his blaster at me, but the power rebounding flung him to his knees. The blaster was knocked over the side of the roof-landing, and the Spartan staggered to his feet again, and weaved back.

Then, abruptly, his eyes bulged with awe that changed to terror. He backed away, staring, not at me, but at something beside me. Then the Spartan disappeared suddenly. I heard a faint *whirring* that rose up and faded rapidly. For an instant I followed the sound of the jet-car as it receded toward the red moon outlining the archaic structure of the Golden Gate Bridge, then I turned to see what had saved my life. It had been prolonged at least.

I hadn't been at all surprised to see the little man appear on the private jet-car landing of my San Francisco apartment. There had been no sound, only coruscating shifting hues of light that materialized him, not like the magic of old, but with all the magnificent and unlimited magic of science.

He stood there juggling the huge silver globe like a bubble toy, but one that certainly could never burst. His long, delicate arms and legs and torso couldn't have lifted twenty pounds without straining. The silver sphere must be elevated by unknown forces of its own.

The little man's body, only a bit more than bone tightly stretched over with transparent, form fitting material, swayed toward me. The pinched up, chalk face in the midst of that bulging head studied me with enigmatic lack of expression that was extremely disconcerting. I could read plenty of purpose behind the blankness. So much elaborate ritual demanded proportionate purpose.

The ancient bulky structure of the Bridge twinkled its lights against the night sky behind the little man. Or was it the

twitching of my eyes? I was preparing for a run over to the Federal Building for a meeting of the Pacific Defense Zone of the International Peace Maintenance Fleet, but, important as that meeting was to be, I had forgotten it completely.

HIS voice was nasal, squeaky, and somehow contemptuous. It was halting, too, difficult to follow. I doubted if he had ever employed the International symbols before. In fact, I intuitively knew that he was either not of my time at all, or not of my world.

"I have studied the psychology of all potential men for the task that is to follow. I have chosen you, Ivan Allinger."

"Should I be flattered?"

I studied him, but could reach no conclusion.

The face puckered more. "Flattered?" The meaning of the word seemed to escape him for a moment. "Perhaps. It is a great task. I have not chosen you because of your physical attributes alone, although they seem exceptional enough. Your ideological background will synchronize perfectly with the job that you must do in Mohln."

"Mohln?"

"It is another world. A future and far distant one."

"You are from some future time? Really?"

"Yes. Mohln is another planet of this system, to which your descendants will migrate in a length of time you would label one million years. Our greatest scientist, the atavistic female, Jokan, demanded that I go back into the past of the race and seek out an object for her laboratory experiments."

I accepted him as he presented himself, which is always advisable under such circumstances. "I'm afraid that doesn't sound inviting at all," I explained. "A guinea pig of some sort for future scientific probing. Sorry." I started away, though I knew he could stop me when he pleased. It was a test. But he stopped me with a word.

"Wait, Ivan."

I turned. "Yes?"

"My reasons for choosing you are different from Jokan's reasons. Let me explain." He tottered toward me weakly on

his spindly legs. I towered over him as he squinted up into my face.

"There are many reasons why I cannot allow your refusal," he said. "One great reason that ties you with destiny."

I tried to escape then, feeling that he was right. I knew that a series of unimaginable events were twisting me into cosmic circumstances. Circumstances too gigantic to even excite amazement or disbelief, only stunned passivity. I wasn't able to execute an about face or the lifting of one leg that might possibly have sent me beyond the range of the little man's potentiality.

I had forgotten the silver sphere which bobbed beside him as a monstrous toy night. It began to glow and expand into a great bulb of incandescence, and it caught me immediately and paralyzed me, and sucked me into realms of cosmology beyond the wildest imaginings of all the Einsteins. I actually felt the sensation of melting. Of melting and flowing as an integral part of space-time, for want of a better phrase. I was an atomic drop of liquid poured into a river without beginning, end or embankments. Perfection was an empty, archaic word to me. I had never thought it could be intellectually employed, and I was especially careful not to apply it to that shifting abstract—woman. I was looking at it now. A perfect woman. A creation molded from centuries of perfection; a creation of symmetric loveliness that was literally and figuratively out of this world.

My last day on Earth was ended. I had opened my eyes. I saw first that some miracle of science had reconstructed the burned away half of my right arm. Then I noticed the woman. I was sitting bolt upright in an instant on the smooth metal table. The little man with his strange "Buck Rogers" dress was looking quietly at me. And she was looking at me, too, out of slitted lids that veiled all the women of the ages in subtly yet violently burning eyes.

She lifted a jeweled hand. Her sensual lips trembled a little before they parted, and strong white teeth gleamed provocatively between the red lines.

I started, and gripped hard at the edges of the table. Was this the way a woman scientist studied coldly and objectively a prospective laboratory subject? I looked questioningly at the little wizened man who

had kidnaped me from my own world. His blank face showed me nothing.

Then, when she spoke . . .

I don't want to take unnecessary time at this point or any other to explain or describe this woman, Joka. I doubt if you could visualize her anyway, even if I occupied this entire narrative describing her, because she was too strangely lovely. She was perfection, as I've said, and that's all. Her voice was music, and I involuntarily started toward her as she spoke.

"WITHDRAW the brain recorder, Draken," she said softly, not taking those icy eyes from mine. The little man, Draken, complied. She pointed to a great three-dimensional chart extending across the laboratory. It was made up of shifting convolutions and numerical graphs and complicated combinations of shadings corresponding to brain patterns.

"That is your brain, Ivan," she said. Her voice was cold, completely frozen, and yet—"We know all about you." I felt a little disappointment along with the relief. She turned toward Draken.

"You made a great mistake, Draken. Bringing in an Intellectual was a foolish thing to do."

Draken objected. "But you said you wanted a good physical specimen. This man is. You defined your requested specimen in no greater detail."

"But you should know that an intellectual can cause difficulties. This man would be considered a god among the women. Perhaps even among the men. Mohln is at a point where such an element as this could precipitate disaster, create perhaps a germ of dissatisfaction with our great order. Or is that, by chance, what you intend?"

Draken backed away. "No, it isn't."

"Don't let the presence of this man be known beyond these four walls, or out of your own laboratory. For your sake and mine, heed my suggestion, Draken."

"Yes," quivered Draken. "I am heeding it. But you know my attitude toward this *great* order. You know how I regard the maintenance of the Status Quo."

I knew it too, from the way his pallid lips curled. This little man hated the Mohln system, whatever it was.

Joka got languidly to her feet, a fluid musical allegro. "I know, Draken. If

you weren't the greatest thinker in Mohln besides myself, I would report you to the Council for the Maintenance of the Status Quo. But as long as you only think idly, you can cause Mohln no harm."

"The only harm Mohln can suffer," said Draken wearily, "is to continue on as it does now. Toward final decay and rot."

Joka laughed frostily. I shivered. "Stop worrying, Draken, and go away. I must begin my experiments." She turned her eyes on me. She could have stared down a bronze statue. I turned my eyes from hers on the pretense of looking for Draken, but he was gone.

I jumped to my feet, and the movement revealed that I, too, had on the costume that Draken wore.

Without egoism, I can say that it must have looked more becoming on me than on the little scientist. I was at least a foot taller than Joka.

She came toward me, fluid motion. I couldn't back away—I insist I wanted to get away for various reasons, the least being that I wanted to get solid on my mental feet—from the metal table. I looked almost frantically for a door or some kind of exit, even a window. There was nothing.

Then those perfect arms slipped around my neck and that body pressed itself against mine and—

I am only human. That's a trite enough excuse, if an excuse is necessary, but under those conditions I could certainly do no less. I let my arms come around her perfect waist, and I bent her back in the most acceptable televex manner and planted a long solid one right on those perfect lips—lips I'm very certain had never been kissed before.

And that was precisely the trouble, perhaps, with that thoughtless, but irresistible, impulse of mine. Her nails were long and sharp and they clawed at my face. Cold light blazed in her eyes, flashing with outraged dignity and burning hate.

I swung down and away, sliding across the metal table, and stood with blood running down my face, with the table my only protection between myself and this paradoxical Circe.

"Savage," she shrieked, and shrieking was very unbecoming to the cold austerity of her. In fact it was like a cloak I had

torn away from her body. "Primal, barbaric beast!"

"I'm not quite primal enough to cope with you," I said, looking more frantically still for an exit. There still weren't any exits, but people came into this room, and people went out of it. How?

I expected her to vault the table after me, but she lithely backed away, and though I didn't realize it then, her cold brain was summoning her eunuchs from afar.

A section of the wall to one side began to glow like a light through semi-opaque glass. The light deepened and began to whirl. And then I saw that there was a kind of opening there. Yes. A kind of opening with something promising no good lumbering through, its head and massive shoulders projecting up out of the shifting mist like a televexed fictional monster.

It was a monstrous metal man. A real, animated robot out of an old scientification fabrication. It was coming directly for me. I flashed one look—I think it was a beseeching one—at Joka. In such instances as that people swallow great lumps of their pride.

JOKA was stretched up to her complete height against the far wall. Her face was expressionless, and her eyes oozed liquid oxygen. Her hands were strained into fists at her sides. "Atavistic," Draken had said of this female scientist of Mohln. An understatement promising no hope for consideration.

I dodged beneath the robot's reaching appendages. There were three arms with a number of variously utilized digits at the end of each. And all of them were wicked. Many of them designed for purposes I couldn't grasp. Anyway I looked at it, the robot represented a perfect mauling and crushing instrument.

I can describe it now with a light touch. Then I was trembling with cold fear, and sweat poured off my face as I eluded the robot by dodging about the only fixture in the middle of the room, the table. I noticed a minor motion of Joka; then I watched, with a hideously empty stomach, the table fold itself into the floor.

I leaped to one side and grabbed Joka, twisted her around in front of me, and said with as little chattering as possible into her perfect pink little ear, "Call them off or—"

I tightened my arm about her throat and began bending her head back. She writhed around and kicked me, and her finger nails started their old habit pattern again. But she wasn't used to this sort of thing, and didn't employ any real effeminate technique at all.

I continued bending her head back. I could feel her choking and gasping. She knew then that I would kill her. I hadn't asked to come to Mohln, wherever and whenever it was. It was all something I had nothing to do with, that now threatened my life. All directly the responsibility of Joka. To me, she was a real Circe, deserving no sympathy, only hate, and deserving death. But I could never have actually tried, or threatened to kill her, under less pressing conditions than those. It was simply a case of breaking her neck to save mine, which I consider justified.

The metallic digits squeezed shut on each elbow, from behind. I twisted my head upward at the second robot, sweating pain in my eyes. Unfeeling paralysis then, as the digits tore through muscle tendon, nerve fibers and even cracked bone. I was mouthing sounds, probably screaming, hearing my own cries from a great distance, blinded by pain, a mist blurring my eyes.

I was lifted straight up, then swung down beneath one implacable arm. I dangled there, my crushed elbows swinging and dripping beneath my face. I saw those perfect little feet come up and stand in front of my tortured eyes. And they were perfect little feet, encased in red sandals to match the blood from my wounds. Even facing torture, and possible death, I thought of them as perfect little feet. I didn't attempt to twist my face upward.

I kept on staring crazily at those perfect little feet. There was character and expression in them, different and more sympathetic than the body they supported. They came closer, shifted a bit, uncertain and nervous. I had been brought here as the subject for anatomical research, a laboratory specimen to be dissected. Yet, for an instant, another purpose had shown in Joka's eyes. I knew that, or did I merely want to know it. I tried to imagine how terribly lonely and maladjusted she must be in a loveless world. Beautiful and to be desired, yet in a loveless, sexless world.

With specimens like Draken, I could easily guess that this was the kind of world in which Jokan lived out frustration. Perfect women, and pathetic, skin-and-bone puppets for men.

She had said I would be a god among women. Without egoism, again, I could see why. There was too much gross ambiguity. The women and men just didn't seem to be of identical species. And in addition, Jokan was an atavistic.

Which wouldn't matter anymore to me, because I was being dragged out of there. Where? Into what? How could I know? I watched those feet fade into blurred distance. They were whirling around as they faded. I knew I was losing all grasp of consciousness. Which was all right, too, because hard after the initial shock, the real excruciating agony was beginning to shoot into my brain.

Only a few hours later, that's all, and I was all in one piece again. A more effective and healthy feeling organism than before, thanks to incredible biological treatments I couldn't even guess at. I kept flexing my arms, watching them bend and unbend with questioning fascination.

I turned toward Draken. "Why am I still here and alive?"

Draken's embryonic face puckered at me like an impish child's.

He explained: "Jokan is an atavist as I said. Women have always been noted for their bodies rather than their brains, although potentially their brain capacity has always been equal to the male's. And that cultural error has never been changed. Instead, women have grown more beautiful and symmetrical with the centuries, from the standpoint of decadent and ancient aesthetic values. The men, on the other hand, have always been considered as thinkers rather than as creations of beauty. They have developed brain potential alone, while their physical characteristics have atrophied.

"Except for atavists like Jokan, the overly curious longing for the male body, as you represent it, has been conditioned out of the reaction patterns by the psycho-medics by centuries of selection. Jokan, as you have seen, is different. She demanded that I go back to your time, or even further back and return with a man capable of matching her body in physical attraction. You en-

tered her for a moment, but she has recovered from that momentary emotional unbalance."

I OBJECTED at this point. "But you said I was to be just a laboratory specimen for dissection."

"This whole transaction was elaborate and demanded official sanction from the Council. So, on the record, your space-time teleportation is only for biological purposes. You understand."

I nodded. It was not an exceptional situation, basically. It seemed that a few million years of evolution can't destroy the fundamental behavior patterns entirely. "A good man's still hard to find?"

The little scientist stared in blank affirmation. Then he said: "I could have chosen any number of men who could have satisfied Jokan's demands, perhaps even more thoroughly than you. Don't you wonder why I singled you out? With your background in your world, and your ideological concepts, you were the only one for me to choose—for my own purposes."

"Which are—" I prompted.

"Neither of the preceding purposes are the basic ones for my asking you to return here with me. The real reason is that you must destroy Mohln."

I stared. I turned everything over in my mind, then tried to say calmly: "Why? This is civilization and the apex of human progress for which I face death daily in my own time. Destroy it!"

I had begun to regard this little withered man as a first class fanatic, born of highly complicated and advanced psychological conflicts.

He said: "When the Earth was enveloped in its final ice sheet, living as we demanded it ceased to be feasible. The pick of human mentality and physiognomy migrated here to Mohln. Here we began our great—what we thought great—new and scientific social order. Yes, it's reached a zenith all right. A zenith of decay and stagnation. Except for a few scientists, Mohln is populated by mindless automatons. Beautiful, mindless women, and great brained, spineless men. They all exist in a futile vacuum."

I was watching him narrowly for signs of madness. He looked mad enough, but his

squeezed up face was unreadable. I said feebly: "From what little experience I've had here, you seem to have reached a pretty ultimate state of civilization."

"That is the great tragedy. There is no ultimate state. That is the great delusion which you must shatter. Everyone, societies, worlds, all seek an ultimate state. Change is the law, and there is no ultimate law. This world of Mohln thinks it has achieved an ultimate perfection. It has, because of the delusion, only succeeded in stagnation. This social structure is neither alive nor dead, Ivan Allinger. It is standing still. The ultimate futility is to be static."

"Then you refute yourself," I said, feeling for a sophistic insert. "You have reached an ultimate something."

"Only movement is the ultimate goal. And change is success. Advancement-progress is limitless. This culture of Mohln has reached an ultimate lostness. Only one action can shake it back onto the pattern of change. The entire World-City of Mohln must be destroyed, reduced to chaos. Out of this chaos, by trial and error, the people of Mohln must be given the germ of incentive again, and forced by necessity to fight their way back onto new roads of endeavor."

I thought hard. I felt familiar struggles in my heart. I understood this. My own life was dedicated, back in my own space and time, to this same effort and goal—to stimulate progress, and change; to destroy all reactionary elements that might lead to permanence.

He followed my introspection with words. "You fought in the great wars of your time against the reactionary forces that would have led your society into staticism ad decay. You are devoting the present to the furthering of the ideals of progress. Do you want to see all your work, and all the work of all your kind, of your own present, past and future end in—this?"

He spread his withered arms about him, encompassing the whole of the World-City of Mohln.

"No," I heard myself muttering. "No. I wouldn't want that. I would prevent it, if I could. But I demand more than your words to convince me that this magnificence of organization I see about me is the hope-

less futility you are telling me it is."

"I will take you out into the city and show you," he said. "But it is strictly against the rules of the Council. And the few intellectuals, the scientists and research technicians don't care anymore about the disintegration of the order about them. In their own little worlds they find something to work on, a stimulus, and they ignore everything else. Like Jokan."

DRAKEN led me out onto a balcony, and I saw—well, a word that might inspire somewhat explanatory suggestive visions of what I saw, in your own mind, could be the symbol, Utopia. It was an endlessly stretching composite of all social dreams.

The mauve lighting that softened the city like a beautiful mist. The mighty, gleaming plastic shells of buildings. Power hung at levels reaching high toward a translucent dome that covered the city. Tiers on tiers of splendidly designed walkways, tubeways and highways networked the spaces between structures. And the air sang with music, more magnificent than all the symphonies of my own time.

I forgot the dizzying height, and almost stepped out into the exalting splendor of it. There seemed no danger, as though it were all an endless soft cloud of enchantment into which I could sink, then float buoyed up by dreams and music and shifting light . . .

But the little tugging fingers of Draken dragged me back.

"It is all false," he whispered. "It is all delusion. Beneath all this grandeur the lost puppets dance and sleep, but never live. These words, which are the only words that make a social system worthy of continuation—curiosity, incentive, ambition, drive, longing, dissatisfaction—all meaningless here, all unknown to these pathetic tropisms. If you will come with me, you can see for yourself, and understand."

I went with little Draken. I did see for myself. I understood . . .

And Draken was entirely correct in all that he had said. This World-City of Mohln had achieved an ultimate—an ultimate lostness. It was a magnificent hollow shell of a City. There were no people in it. All the mighty wonder was lost to



the semi-living marionettes that wandered through it. But it meant life to them, nevertheless. They never had to exert a finger, nor expend the energy of one thousandth of a gram of thinking energy to live. But the technocratic creations of long preceding times, of even a few still working scientists, kept them alive. But they neither knew this, nor cared.

They were fed, clothed, bathed and even reborn by robots.* They were put to sleep, awakened, vitalized, and exhausted by machines. They were parasitic non-entities, dependent on the machines that other, *vital* minds, had built.

Back on the balcony, Draken continued in that squeaky, uncertain quaver of his:

"Everything here is done by robots. There are different castes of robots. Their functional system is graduated up through ever lessening numbers until it reaches what is only a master switch. One single switch in this World-City, pushed too far—" Draken looked at me suggestively and added hoarsely:

"If the master switch was ever pushed too far, this entire civilization, as you call it, would stop functioning with any set mechanical pattern. All the robots and

machines and the system they operate would cease activity. There would be your chaos. There would be the needed situation under which the unthinking slaves will have to think for themselves, solve their own problems once again. Or die. I think they will solve them. I have that much faith in them. They always have. So far."

It was a statement on Draken's part. But it was really a question. Would I push that master switch—too far?

"Why haven't you done this before?" I asked. "Why drag a man from another world, a million years in the past, to do this simple thing?"

Draken lowered his head in the first display of real, understandable emotion I had seen in him. Shame. "I can't," he said simply. "I do not have the will, the free will to do it. My intellect tells me it is the correct thing to do. But my psycho-conditioning has created an insurmountable antipathy toward such an act."

His dried up monkey-like hands clenched into tiny impotent fists. "Many times I have gone into that room and tried to pull that switch. But each time I have failed. I know now that I shall never be able to.

No one in this world could do it until you came. You can. Your age was a dynamic one, of destruction and construction, each inseparable from the other. You could do it, not only with ease, but with the satisfaction of knowing you were taking a necessary step forward in human progress. The question is—will you?"

A LOT of time clambered through my fogged mind then before I formulated a logical sequence of thoughts that led to what seemed to me a logical reply.

"I believe I will," I finally answered slowly. "I can't see that there is any other way out."

"Execution," a familiarly brittle voice said behind me, and I turned. Draken began whimpering pathetically and cowered back against the colonnade.

Jokan stood a few feet from me, wearing a thin, semi-transparent gown that seemed anachronistic and out of place, as though she had gotten the idea for it out of an old history book. Her body was a lithe shadow behind it. But her eyes burned irascible hatred.

"Execution for you, and for Draken; that is a better way."

"I wish I could agree," I said. "But you see our concern is for society as a whole, rather than with a small minority that benefit from the apathy and ignorance of the majority. For your satisfaction, and that of a few others, you may be right. Frankly, dear Jokan, though you're very very lovely to look at, your mind is ugly and warped. And I would rather see you dead."

I sprang and reached for her. She screamed once, before the robots came in and lumbered for me. I remember mumbling about the monotony of the robot act; as she eluded me, and I eluded them. And I kept on trying to grab Jokan. It was an obsession with me.

A quick glance revealed Draken cowered down in his corner, his old child's face twisted in stunned horror.

My only intention at that moment was to get my hands around Jokan's perfect neck just one more time. It was a mad, fanatical urge now. I hated her. I hated her with a blind madness.

The robots weren't nearly as dextrous as they should have been. Physical en-

counter was undoubtedly alien to their primary purpose. This place of Draken's was bigger, with a few articles in it, than the laboratory had been. There were pneumatic chairs and couches and ray lamps and vitamin globes. I ducked, sprawled, ran and careened in and out of these rooms and around the strange looking fixtures. I, close on Jokan's sandaled heels, and the robots close on mine. It might even seem more or less a comical scene in retrospect, but—

Then I saw that silver sphere of Draken's, hanging in the air about four feet from the floor, smooth, mysterious, but very suggestive. As I ran back past Draken, I yelled at him.

I doubt if Draken understood my words, he was so stricken with horror, but he grasped my meaning, and somehow managed to stagger onto his quivering legs and tottered wild-eyed toward the sphere.

But Jokan understood my meaning, too. And through some telepathic direction I still don't understand, she guided the robots onto poor Draken. Draken never had a chance.

I don't think he even comprehended conflict. He could neither fight back, nor try to escape. It seemed that violence, either offensive or defensive, was beyond his understanding. That was why he could not bring himself to pull the master switch that would have accomplished his desired destruction of Mohln. That was also the reason why the robot was able to take him into its inexorable metal arms and crush him into something not far removed from pulp.

His delicate, deep pocketed eyes looked beseechingly into mine, once. Then the tremendous pressure bulged them horribly and unconsciously at me. His bony arms flapped and waved spasmodically and blood spurted from his small almost invisible ears and equally minute nose. Then his whole frail body seemed to crack through the middle and deflate. At another telepathic command from Jokan, the robot's arms raised and unbent, and the body of Draken thudded on the inlaid floor.

I heard myself yelling. I wasn't retreating from the other two robots then, or trying to get away at all. Something gave way inside me. What I had seen just now shocked every sense that might have been

ethical or moral in me. One word churned inside my brain. The word was revenge. And then another word was added to it that seemed better. Compensation. Then another word etched in capital letters overshadowed and encompassed the other two. *Kill.*

THE first robot reached out with its very utilitarian and gadget-studded arms to rake me in. I had no idea how much the monster weighed. But the Frankensteinian creation was off balance as it reached for me. I twisted and grasped the metallic tenacle, heaved forward, throwing my hip into the gleaming stomach and heaved down.

The robot seemed light-weighted enough as it flew ceilingward, and clanged hollowly against the wall. There was a flash of current, a slight odor of ozone as the teleo-electronic man twitched about at my feet.

The violence evidently stunned my fair and wicked Circe. Her telepathic control over the remaining robots faltered and in that instant I seized her. A dead, hot rage swelled through my head and heart so I could hardly draw a breath. I wrenched at her neck, felt it crack dangerously and felt her long sleek muscles tremble against mine.

I felt almost bestial in the power of my rage. I twisted sidewise and felt her body give, and heard her breath coming in short jagged whines like a dog's. Her finger nails weren't clawing now. The cold, emotionless cruelty of her eyes was dying behind fear and indecision. She hasn't been reluctant to dream of blood and guts and shattered bones, but too much of the real thing hurt even her atavistic senses.

"Keep them off me," I said in her ear. She tried to pull away. I held her at arm's length and began slapping her. Her face was white as powder until red finger marks appeared on it. I hit harder and her perfect upper lip split and a narrow line of blood ran down and stained the dark hollow between her perfect marble breasts. The gold-flecked pupils of her eyes widened, and the horror deepened in back of them. The horror went out like a flame and the lids with the perfect long lashes blinked over them and tears flowed down as from a weeping statue.

I threw a quick circuit about the room.

The robots were immobile; tensed, though, for action. At any moment Jokan might regain her Circe faculties and summon them, even if it meant her own life. I didn't know then what emotions surged around inside her strange heart. I lifted her onto my shoulder and started through the rooms.

I had no idea how to escape. Whatever inconceivable manner the walls dissolved through the manipulation of incredible advanced force fields, I of course didn't know. But I put three rooms filled with the futuristic mores between myself and the robot minions of Jokan before I dropped her on a pneumatic couch and wrapped my hands about her throat for the third time and began to squeeze.

I began slowly and methodically, looking all the time into her eyes. Then I saw it. I saw the real depths of her eyes, and a shock trembled through me. Jokan had changed. How she had changed!

She read the implacable purpose in my eyes that I felt in my heart, and as her arms came up, mine slid down softly from about her throat. I kissed her. I lifted her passive softness up and felt it respond. The hands with the feral nails caressed the back of my neck, and her lips were hungry.

I had seen in her eyes a change, and had answered it. Then I said: "Lead me to the room that holds the master switch. Then we'll go."

She slid out of my arms languidly and onto her feet. She leaned toward me, and her fingers grasped mine. They were warm, not cold; how could they ever have been cold? "Go where?"

"Can you run that space-time apparatus that brought me here?"

She nodded, then looked fearfully over my face.

"Take me to the main switch," I repeated.

We went back, and she somehow attracted the translucent, yet not translucent, sphere to her side. It followed after her like a monstrous being, a cosmic slave.

She led me toward the wall and it dissolved. I still am not able to understand the phenomenon. We continued through and into an elevator. We dropped down through a blur of distance. She led me through a glowing tunnel and into a tubecar and there was a dim sensation of move-

ment in which we might have sped a thousand miles, or ten thousand.

She led me out of the tubecar and we crossed a walkway, where lines of listless people stood moving in various directions. The little swollen-headed men and the tall austere but listless women. They were all going places, but it didn't matter. They had eyes, ears, senses, but they might have been machines reacting through photo-electric devices. I thirsted for the main switch that would send them all into blind chaos. It was a hellish thing for the world I had risked my life many times to build upward and progressively toward greatness. But it had all ended here, a blind alley of despair, and the hell I planned would be its only salvation.

Suddenly, from all sides, robots converged on us, directed by a number of the little white-skulled men with velvet togas flapping about slug-white spindly legs.

"The Council," said Jokan. "They are afraid now. They attack, and they are half mad because they have been conditioned that such an act of violence is atavism, the inexcusable social crime."

THEIR puckered faces, in the center of the bloated domes of heads, were strained and flinching. The robots shambled onto Jokan and me, and Jokan did something to them with her mind which evidently was more powerful in this capacity at least than all the Council combined. And the robots turned and began flailing each other into lumps of smoking twisted metal.

My stomach crawled. The Council, supreme intellects of a million years of progress, had fallen down onto the moving walkway, slobbering and twitching in the final stages of dementia. Even a thousand gram brain breaks when faced with an insolvable problem. The gleaming expanse of moving plastic carried the Council out of our sight. The little men and the Amazonian women who slouched past didn't even notice. And if they did, it was foreign to their conditioning. They couldn't think about it.

"They would soon have to think. When I pushed the master switch too far . . .

We encountered no more resistance, if that feeble expression of the apex of human

development so far met could be called resistance. Finally we emerged into a room that surprised me with its lack of grandeur and its barrenness. All the World-City that was meaningless was a dream of ostentation and color and beauty of intricate design. This room, in contrast, the heart of the World-City, the key to its life, was completely denuded. A small plastic shell and in the middle was a conical dais and on the dais was a lever.

Jokan nodded toward the lever and her eyes that followed me as I walked to it and moved it, were bright with some inner fire I couldn't diagnose.

I jerked my hand away.

The meaning of my act enveloped me in a mist of fear. I trembled violently. Sweat beaded on my face and started in my eyes.

Had I been right in my choice? Had Draken been correct in his analysis, and had I been justified in jumping to such an empirical conclusion without more conclusive proof? Had all these nameless slaves of decay been victims of the delusion from which I had freed them? Or had I been deluded by the lies of a fanatic?

I looked down and saw my hand reaching for the lever to move it back. It was an unconscious gesture motivated by vague fears. I seemed such a little man to destroy a world.

What was happening to all animated puppets of this future society now that its mechanical contrivances had been destroyed? What had happened, even back in my own time, in large cities, when only the electric systems had been blown up, or the water mains, or gas mains? What mind-numbing chaos and madness must be developing around me as I stood inside the heart of a world which I had torn loose from its arteries.

Jokan led me from the room and onto a balcony. Somehow I had thought myself down far in the bowels of this World-City. But as I stepped out, clouds were on a level with my eyes, synthetic clouds, and wind slapped my face. We looked down.

Blind in that room with only my imaginative thoughts, the vastness of my act had been a conceivable thing. Here, looking over the true vastness, an endlessness, I found my brain whirling, refusing to consider what was really happening. In a monody of sadness and fatalism, Jokan recited

the meaning to me, as she watched her world crumble.

A sound surged up and about me. A low murmuring that grew and expanded into a vibrating roar. To my right, far away, I saw a massive steely structure explode into a billion fragments and a blinding flash of power carried to my ears a splitting roar. It began happening all over, through the tiers and levels and towering heights of the World-City, as far on any side I looked, as far as I could see.

I cringed. Below, a sea of blind ants scurried madly about in infantile terror. Flying boats crashed as their automatic pilots stopped functioning. All the power of the city had ceased. The smoothly working machinery had become an onrushing nemesis of destruction, each stride feeding on the preceding flaw in function or the complete lack of any function.

Huge structures, power-hung, dropped their millions of tons of weight onto hordes of milling humans who had no idea what was happening—if they had ever known.

Gravity neutralizing units died and whole tiers collapsed. Unlimited power from the harnessing of liquid oxygen reversed into a destructive titan; a wave of overpowering heat rose up in a choking mist. Then the building on which we stood began to tremble.

I turned. The bobbing sphere of escape was between Jokan and I, a small supremely compact unit of atomic power, perhaps, conducting its own motivation. "Why doesn't it stop, too?" I asked, as people ask ambiguous questions in a crisis.

"It responds to the human mind alone," she said. "We have progressed far in physiogenics, too, as well as in the mechanical sciences. Perhaps it is the real world after all. We can go far beyond the machines."

"We'd better go someplace—fast," I said shakily, for the building lurched sickeningly, and I toppled back against the wall. The colonnade buckled in front of me, but Jokan wasn't afraid. She kept looking over the World-City.

I stumbled toward her. The heat was intensifying, becoming intolerable. I clutched at her frantically. "You are going with me," I shouted. I doubt if she heard me. "I love you," I yelled into her ear. "Don't you understand?" She heard that. Her lips

smiled thinly. Pain altered her face like a plastic mask.

I felt the gigantic power of the sphere then as before. It began to glow and oscillate and expand. And it sucked me into its limitless depths and cosmological labyrinths as before. I felt the melting and flowing and the indescribable twisted warping of sanity . . .

JOKAN, working at my side, has done much to conquer the evil virus of the Spartan menace. Her scientific knowledge, and her telepathic acumen, place her above many of our greatest minds. This is enhanced by an almost fanatical desire to destroy those who would destroy social progress. Her faithfulness to duty is legendary.

We love each other with ties no one can understand who hesitate to conceive of bonds extending through dimensions of space and time. She never leaves my side in the unceasing night and day, crusading against the Fascistic disease that is being stamped out, though painfully and with aching slowness, that has extended over six centuries.

But between us there is an uneasiness. Sometimes this uneasiness finds expression in little episodes—like the conversation at the last meeting of the International Agencies in Casablanca. We were having drinks before going into the Presidium.

Jokan was lovely—that's a dismal understatement—in a low cut evening gown of plasti-silk. Her eyes were half closed.

"Will we ever win?" she said over the brim of a Tom Collins, which is still the world's favorite cocktail.

"Yes," I said. Then I turned casually, though I didn't feel casual at all. I knew what she was thinking.

"You must be the greatest optimist of all time," she said. "And I'll help you and myself and all of us stay that way. I'll never mention it again. Perhaps we can both forget."

"Try to forget what?" I said, though I knew well enough.

Her eyes fixed mine as only her eyes can. "Forget that the great world we're fighting so hard to build we will be destroying a million years from tonight."

I coughed and ordered another drink for myself. But I can't forget.

The Million Year Picnic

By RAY BRADBURY

They were supposed to be starting on a picnic, a wonderful day of fun. But there was a gun in the boat, and too much food and equipment. And just behind the veil of vacation—instead of the soft face of laughter—there was something hard and bony and terrifying.



Illustration by LEYDENFROST

SOMEHOW the idea was brought up by Mom that perhaps the whole family would enjoy a fishing trip. But they weren't Mom's words; Timothy

knew that. They were Dad's words, and Mom used them for him, somehow.

Dad shuffled his feet in a clutter of Martian pebbles, and agreed. So immediately

there was a tumult and a shouting, and quick as jets the camp was tucked into capsules and containers, Mom slipped into traveling jumpers and blouse, Dad stuffed his pipe full with trembling hands, his eyes on the Martian sky, and the three boys piled yelling into the motorboat, none of them really keeping an eye on Mom and Dad, except Timothy.

Dad pushed a stud. The water-boat sent a humming sound up into the sky. The water shook back and the boat nosed ahead, and the family cried, "Hurrah!"

Timothy sat in the back of the boat with Dad, his small fingers on top of Dad's large hairy ones, watching the canal twist, leaving the crumbled place behind where they had landed their small tourist rocket.

Dad had a funny look in his eyes as the boat went up-canal. A look that Timothy couldn't figure. It was made of strong light and maybe a lot of joy. It made the deep wrinkles laugh instead of worry or cry.

So there went the tourist rocket, around a bend, gone.

"How far are we going?" Robert splashed his hand. It looked like a small crab jumping in the violet water.

Dad exhaled. "A million years."

"Gee," said Robert.

"Yeah," said Michael.

"Look, kids." Mother pointed one soft long arm. "There's a dead city."

They looked with fervent anticipation, and the dead city lay dead for them and them alone, drowsing in a hot silence of summer made on Mars by a Martian weatherman.

And Dad looked as if he was pleased that it was dead.

It was a futile spread of pink rocks sleeping on a rise of sand, stretching lazy crumbled arms out three miles, petering finally into a dribble of collapsed pillars, a few tumbled wharves, one lonely shrine with images stolen from it, and then the sweep of sand again. Nothing else for miles. A white desert around the canal, and a blue desert over it, with a sun drifting on the blue one.

Just then, a rocket went up. Like a stone thrown across a blue pond, hitting with a scar of flame, falling deep, deeper, and vanishing.

Dad got a scared look in his eyes when

he saw it, and added speed to the boat, gritting his teeth.

That was the last Earth rocket for one hundred days.

Looking up at the sky that was an ocean. You couldn't see a trace of war. Couldn't see men fighting and slaughtering each other like hung pig carcasses, gushing hot, salt blood.

Space dimensions narrowed that all down to one specule of matter, a dot against the cosmos labeled Earth. As removed and far off as two flies battling to the death in the arch of a great high and silent cathedral. And just as senseless.

William Thomas wiped his forehead, and felt the touch of his son's hand on his arm, like a young tarantula, thrilled. He beamed at his son. "How goes it, Timmy?"

"Fine, Dad."

Timothy hadn't quite figured out what was ticking inside the vast adult mechanism beside him. The man with the immense hawk nose, sun-burnt, peeling—and the hot blue eyes like agate marbles you play with after school in summer back on Earth, and the long thick columnar legs in the loose riding breeches.

"What are you looking at so hard, Dad?"

"I was looking for Earthian logic, common sense, good government, peace and responsibility."

"All that up there?"

"No. I didn't find it. It's not there any more. Maybe it'll never be there again. Maybe we fooled ourselves that it was ever there."

"Huh?"

"See the fish," said Dad, pointing.

THERE rose a soprano clamor from all three boys as they rocked the boat in arching their tender necks to see. They *oohed* and *ahhed*. A silver ring-fish floated by them, undulating, and closing like an iris, instantly, around food particles, to assimilate them.

Dad looked at it. His voice was deep and quiet.

"Just like war. War swims along, sees food, contracts. A moment later—Earth is gone."

"William," said Mother.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Dad.

Another ring-fish came by, drawing more noise from them, and more pointing. And

then they sat still and felt the canal water rush cool under them, swift and glassy. The only sound was the motor-hum, the rush of the water, and the sun heating the air—which wasn't much. Once in a great while a bird would come singing and go singing and drop from hearing and sight.

On both sides of the canal now they saw the great oxygen vines and bushes, planted in irregular diagrams upon sand; plants with deep reaching roots thrusting miles after the wither water-gut of the planet; sowed by far-seeing scientists of Earth fifty years before, and only now profuse enough, active enough to give Mars a thin atmospheric shell.

Dad looked at them and shook his head. He caught himself when he saw Mom staring at him, and this was another symbol that Timothy couldn't fathom.

"When do we see the Martians?" cried Michael, who was ten years old and decorated conspicuously with the medals of Mendalian skin-coloration—freckles. "When do we see the Martians?"

"Quite soon, perhaps," said Father. "Maybe this afternoon. Maybe tonight."

"How do you mean?" asked Mom. "The Martians are a dead race."

"Oh, no, they're not. I'll show you some Martians, all right," William Thomas said, presently.

Timothy scowled at that, but said nothing. There was no questioning the alien thought patterns of grownups. And he had found it far happier circumstance to place his questions only intermittently, and then when he was certain his parents would humor them.

The other boys were already engaged making shelves of their small hands and peering under them toward the seven foot stone banks of the canal, watching for Martians.

"What do they look like?" demanded Michael.

"You'll know them when you see them." Dad sort of laughed, and Timothy saw a pulse beating time in his cheek.

Mother was slender and soft, with a woven plait of spun gold hair over her head in a tiara, and eyes the color of the deep cool canal water where it ran in shadow, almost purple, with flecks of amber caught in it. You could see her thoughts

swimming around in her eyes, like fish—some bright, some dark, some fast, quick, some slow and easy, and sometimes, like when she looked up where Earth was, being nothing but color and nothing else.

She sat in the boat's prow, one hand resting on the side-lip, the other on the lap of her dark blue breeches, and a line of sunburnt soft neck showing where her blouse opened like a white flower.

She kept looking ahead to see what was there, and not being able to see it clearly enough, she looked backward toward her husband, and through his eyes, reflected then, she saw what was ahead; and since he added part of himself to this reflection, a determined firmness, her face relaxed and she accepted it, and she turned back knowing, suddenly, what to look for.

Timothy looked, too. But all he saw was a straight pencil line of canal going violet through a wide shallow valley penned by low, eroded hills, and on until it fell over the sky's edge. And this canal went on and on, through cities that would have rattled like beetles in a dry skull if you shook them. A hundred or two hundred cities dreaming hot summer day dreams and cool summer night dreams . . .

THEY were going far on this outing—to fish. But there was a gun in the boat. This was a vacation. But why all the food, more than enough to last them years and years, left hidden back there near the rocket? Vacation. But just behind the veil of the vacation was not a soft face of laughter, but something hard and bony and perhaps terrifying. Timothy could not left the veil, and the two other boys were busy being ten years old and eight years old, respectively.

"No Martians yet. Nuts." declared Robert, seriously miffed. He put his v-shaped chin on his hands and glared at the canal.

Dad had brought an atomic-radio along, strapped to his wrist. It functioned on an old-fashioned principle; you held it against your the bones near your ear, and it vibrated singing or talking to you. Dad listened to it now. His face looked like one of those fallen Martian cities, caved in, sucked dry, almost dead.

Then he gave it to Mom to listen. Her lips dropped open.

"What . . .?" Timothy started to ques-

tion. but withdrew tactfully, to watch.

Glancing hastily upward, Dad notched the boat speed higher, immediately. The boat leaped and jounced and spanked. This shook Robert out of his funk, and elicited yelps of frightened but ecstatic joy from Michael, who clung to Mom's legs and watched the water pour by his nose in a wet torrent. . . .

Dad must have seen something, because he cut speed, swerved the boat, curved and ducked it into a little branch canal and under an ancient crumbling stone wharf dwelling that smelled like crab flesh.

Air-brakes stopped the boat, and Dad twisted to see if the ripples on the canal were enough to map their route into hiding. Water lines went across, lapped the stones, and came back to meet each other, settling to be dappled by the sun. It all went away.

Dad listened. So did everybody.

High in the sky there was a sound like a metal spider spinning a web of noise over and across, down and around, over and across; a swift weaving over the whole land again and again. The spider was a rocket, and the web was flame and noise from its jets.

Dad's breathing echoed like fists beating against the cold wet wharf stones. In the shadow, Mom's cat-eyes just watched Father for some clue to—what next?

The sky spider stopped spinning its web and went away. Father sank back, sighing, and Timothy put out his hand and patted the dark hair on his arm.

A moment later there were two titanic, marrow-jolting explosions that grew upon themselves. Followed by half a dozen others.

"The ship," said Dad. "They found the rocket."

Michael said, "What happened, Dad, what happened?"

"Oh, they just blew up our rocket, that's all," said Timothy, trying to sound matter-of-fact. "I've heard rockets blown up before. Ours just blew. Not only ours, but four others."

Timothy thought about it and added, "There were only four others on Mars. Down by the Science Colony where those one hundred men lived."

"Why did they do that?" asked Michael. "Huh, Dad?"

Dad still listened, the audio to his ear,

blinking wet eyes. After two minutes he dropped his hand like you would drop a rag.

"It's all over," he said to Mom. "The radio just went off the atomic beam. Every other world station's gone. The air is completely silent. It'll probably remain silent."

"For how long?" asked Robert.

"Maybe—your great-grandchildren will hear it again," said Dad. He just sat there, and the kids were caught in the center of his awe and defeat and resignation and acceptance.

Finally, he put the boat out into the canal again and they continued in the direction in which they had originally started.

It was beginning to get late. Already the sun was down the sky, and a series of dead cities was ahead of them.

Dad talked very quietly and gently to the kids. Many times in the past he had been brief, distant, removed from them, but now he patted them on the head with just a word and they felt it.

"Mike, pick a city."

"What, Dad?"

"Pick a city, son. Any one of these cities we pass by."

"All right," said Michael. "How do I pick?"

"Pick the one you like the most. You, too, Robert, and Tim. Pick the city you like the most."

"I want a city with Martians in it," said Michael.

"You'll have that. I promise," said Dad. His lips were for the kids, but his eyes were for Mom.

They passed six cities in twenty minutes. Dad didn't say anything more about the explosions, he seemed much more interested in having fun with the kids, keeping them happy, than anything else. .

MICHAEL liked the first city they passed, but this was vetoed because everyone doubted quick, first judgments. The second city nobody liked. Timothy liked the third because it was fairly large. The fourth and fifth were too small, and the sixth brought acclaim from everyone, including Mother, who joined in the *Gees*, *Goshes* and *Look-At-Thats*.

There were fifty or sixty huge structures still standing; streets were dusty, but paved, and you could see one or two old

centrifugal fountains still pulsing wetly in the plazas. That was the only life—water leaping in the settling sun.

"This is the city," said Timothy.

"Yes, this is it," agreed Dad. "Yes, Alice?"

Mom nodded swiftly, her face an exact replica of Dad's expression.

Steering the boat to a landing flat, Dad jumped out.

"Here we are kids. This is ours. This is where we live from now on."

"From now on?" Michael was incredulous. He stood up, looking, and then turned to stare back at where the rocket used to be. "What about the rocket, what about New York City?"

"Here," said Dad.

He placed the wrist audio against Michael's blond, pear-shaped skull. "Listen." Michael listened.

"Nothing," he said.

"That's right. Nothing. Nothing at all any more. No more New York, no more Earth, no more Rocket."

Michael considered the lethal revelation and began to sob little dry sobs, uncoiled as yet by tears.

"Wait a moment," said Dad, the next instant. "I'm giving you a whole lot more in exchange, Mike!"

"What?" Michael held off the tears, curious, but quite ready to continue in case Dad's further revelation was as disconcerting as the original.

"I'm giving you this city, Mike. It's yours."

"M-mine . . ."

"For you and Robert and Timothy, all three of you, to own for yourselves."

Timothy bounded out of the boat. "Look, guys, all for us; all of *THAT*!" He was playing the game with Dad, playing it good and big, and without a tear. Later, after it was all over and things had settled, he could go off by himself and cry for ten minutes. But now it was still a game, still a family outing, and the other kids must be kept playing.

Mike jumped out, with Robert. They helped Mom out.

"Be careful of your sister," said Dad, and nobody knew what he meant until later.

They hurried into the great, pink-stoned city, whispering among themselves, be-

cause dead cities have a way of making you want to whisper, to watch the sun go down.

"In about five days," Dad said, quietly, "I'll go back down to where our rocket was and collect the food hidden in the ruins there, and bring it up; and I'll hunt for Ralph Edwards and his daughters and his wife there."

"Daughters?" asked Timothy. "How many?"

"Four," said Dad.

"I can see that'll cause trouble later," said Mother, cryptically.

"Girls," Michael made a face like an old Mars stone image. "Girls. *Gahh!*"

"Is this really ours, Dad?"

"The whole planet belongs to us, kids. The whole darn planet."

They stood there, King of the Hill, Top of the Heap, Ruler of All They Surveyed, Unimpeachable Monarchs and Presidents, trying to understand what it meant to own a world, and how big a world really was.

Night came quickly in the thin atmosphere, and Dad left them in the square by the pulsing fountain, went down to the boat, came walking back carrying a pile of papers in his big hands.

He laid the papers in a clutter in the old courtyard and set them afire. To keep warm, they crouched around them and laughed, and Timothy saw the little letters leap like frightened animals when the flames touched and engulfed them. The papers crinkled like an old man's skin and the cremation surrounded words like this:

"Government Bonds, Political Maps, Religious Quarrels, Beliefs, Sciences, Prejudices of the Pan-American Unity, Stock Report for July 23, 2044, THE WAR DIGEST . . ."

Dad had insisted on bringing these papers, for this purpose. He sat there and fed them into the fire, one by one, with satisfaction, and told them what it all meant.

"**I**'M BURNING a way of life, just like that way of life is being burned clean of Earth right now. Forgive me if I talk like a politician. I am, after all, a former governor of a state, and I was honest and they hated me for it. Life on earth never oriented itself! It never seemed to have time to settle down or get anywhere good.

Science got too far ahead of them too quickly, and the people got lost in a scientific wilderness, like children making over pretty things, gadgets, helicopters and rockets; putting emphasis on wrong things; on machines instead of the thought of how to run the machines. Wars got worse and killed them. That's what the silent radio means. That's what we ran away from.

"Mars is ripe for colonization. Scientists have worked for half a century to prepare it for colonies. But there were too few rockets. I was state-governor. I had pull. I arranged it so your mother and I could bring you kids here as the first colonial family. I knew the war was coming, that the scientists would be called back from Mars to help. We were supposed to go back, too. We didn't. We took a fishing trip. Well, I hoped it wouldn't be this bad. I didn't want to tell you kids unless I had to. But Earth is gone. Interplanetary travel won't be back for another two hundred years, maybe longer, maybe never. But that way of life proved itself wrong, and it strangled itself with its own hands. You're young. I'll tell you this again every day until it sinks in."

Dad paused to feed more papers into the fire.

"Now, we are alone. We and a handful of others who are to meet us in a few days. If they lived. A few of them, I'm sure, will come up the canal. Enough to start over. Enough to begin. Enough to turn their backs on chaos and strike out on a new line . . ."

The fire leaped up to emphasize his talking. He was full of that fire. And then all the papers were gone, except one. That was a symbol, too. All the laws and beliefs of Earth were burnt into small hot ashes which soon would be carried off in a wind.

Timothy looked at the last thing that Dad tossed in the fire. It was a map of the United States, and it wrinkled and distorted itself hotly and went—*flimpf*—and was gone like a warm, black butterfly.

Timothy had to turn his head away and swallow, hard.

"Now, I'm going to show you the Martians," said Dad. He got up. "Come along, all of you. Here, Alice." He took her hand.

Michael was crying loudly, and Dad picked him up and carried him, and they walked down through the ruins toward the canal.

The canal. Where tomorrow or the next day their future wives would come up in a boat—small laughing girls now, with their father and mother.

The night came down around them, and there were stars. But Timothy couldn't find Earth. It had already set. That was something to think about. *It was already set.*

A cool night wind blew around them, and as they walked, Dad said, "Your mother and I will try to teach you. We both have degrees in psychology. Perhaps we'll fail. I think not. We've had experience. We've seen. We planned this trip years ago, even before you were born. Even if there hadn't been a war, we would have come to Mars to live and form our own standard of living. It would have been another hundred years before Mars would have been even faintly poisoned by Earth civilization. Now, of course—"

They reached the canal. It was long and straight and cool and wet and reflective in the night.

"I've always wanted to see a Martian," said Michael, stiltedly. "Where are they, Dad? You promised."

"There they are, Mike," said Dad, and he shifted Michael on his shoulder and pointed straight down.

The Martians were there, all right. It sent a thrill chasing through Timothy.

The Martians were there—in the canal—reflected in the water. Timothy and Michael and Robert and Mom and Dad.

The Martians stared back up at them for a long, long silent time from the rippling water. . . .

THE SHADOW - GODS

By VASELEOS GARSON

Curt watched them, screaming as they fled before the shadow-things—the tortured humans of Earth. He watched them die, crushed and seared by the spreading blue flower, and he cursed himself. With all his knowledge and strength he could not save his people.

AROUND them, space—implacable but generous, impalpable but tangible—shot through with a thousand far off suns.

Looming at starboard, blacking out a section of space, the dark starside of the Moon. Then hundreds of flickering fireflies moving out of the darkness, blinking on by ones . . . twos . . . threes . . . as they passed the black moon's rim.

Curt Wing relaxing, his dark head nodding softly, his dark eyes widening as he stared into the teleplate. He stared into the plate, and his lips, for so many hours a thin gray line, pursed into an almost inaudible whistle.

Without turning his head, he said to the lean rangy blond lieutenant beside him.

"That did it, Packer. It flushed them from cover. Curiosity did it."

"Now?" Lt. George Packer asked, pulling on his helmet, reaching for the red button to sound the klaxon alarm. One long finger almost touched the scarlet dot which would send a hundred crews on a hundred Earth ships into the action which they had awaited for these long weeks.

Curt Wing, wing Space Commander, shook his black shock of hair with deliberate slowness, wiped the sticky sweat from the palms of his hands on his gold-striped blue breeches.

"Wait."

"But, Curt! We've waited two weeks. And for the last seven hours the crew has been going mad. They know the Mercurians must be out there now. We got the flash on the intercommunicator and it's tuned to all-ship length."

"I know," Wing said. "But what's an-

other moment or two. This has to be right. We'll never get another chance like this again. Be patient, George."

Curt Wing still stared at the visaplate.

"They must have the whole fleet with them! I've never seen so many Mercurian ships in my life."

"They'll spot us," Lt. Packer said anxiously. "Let me signal, Curt."

"Easy, George. This is Earth's last chance. We've got to be sure it's good. They've got us—ten to one. Surprise is our only chance of whittling down the odds."

"But every minute, Curt, every minute counts. They'll spot us sure."

His eyes still soldered to the plate, Wing said, an overtone of exasperation in his deep-timbered voice; "We've been here two weeks. They didn't spot our black ships in the moon's shadow before. I hardly think they will now. Take it easy."

The two stood there, watching the black shadow of the plate, now flickering with swarms of silver Mercurian ships. Beads of sweat built up on Curt Wing's forehead, swelled, then rolled down his lean, harsh-planed face to make tiny plopping sounds on the duralloy deck beneath their feet.

"Man!" Lt. Packer burst out. "Curt, are you mad? We've got to strike now. Their black light visas'll pick us up any second."

Wing Space Commander Wing didn't answer. Seconds oozed away like vicious blobs of oil. Then:

"Now!"

PACKER'S itching finger stabbed the red button viciously. Muted through the thick bulkheads surrounding the plot-

ting room came the ululating howl of the ready signal.

Curt Wing moved from the teleplate, clicked on the intercommunications speaker, came back to the plate. He studied it for a moment, unmindful of George Packer who was chewing his nails very deliberately.

Curt Wing lifted his head, turned toward the speaker and said casually,

"Fire at will."

Then his dark eyes turned back to the thousand fireflies flickering in the visaplate. Lt. Packer crowded his lean body alongside of him, stared at the screen.

The ship shuddered. The deck quivered beneath their feet like a restrained earthquake. Almost simultaneously, the fireflies in the visaplate were spotting with flowering bursts of bright-hued colors which hid other of the fireflies for a long moment.

A metallic voice echoed into the plotting room as the spotter's hit calculator started clacking from its eyrie in the nose of the ship.

"Seven direct . . . no twelve . . ." the metallic voice broke, then resumed and reflected the glee of the spotter. "Commander, this damn machine's gone mad. We're hitting them so fast it can keep up!"

The flagship trembled again, and the visaplate was filled with the bright, blooming flowers as Mercurian ship after Mercurian ship tasted the atomic bolts, sucked them up and exploded.

Curt Wing's voice was no longer casual as he turned his lips toward the intercom.

"Sock it to 'em, you precious monkeys. You've got a million Earthmen to avenge!"

Then he kicked the tuning dial over, swept the visascreen from Earth ship to Earth ship. Only the flashing blue bolts identified most, but here and there an Earth ship blazed red, then white and molten metal dripped off into the darkness as the Mercurian ships lashed back at the dark shrouded hornets which were poisoning them with quick flashing death.

The huge Mercurian fleet, its thousands scattered through with broken hulks, was turning slowly, its own bolts searching out, lighting up the blackness which hid the tiny Earthian fleet.

The silver ships moved in, and concentrated hell poured on to one of the far-

flung ships of Earth. The Earth ship exploded into myriad shells of molten metal, and the horrible atomic rays moved to the next blue flashing terrestrial ship.

Curt Wing's voice barked into the intercom:

"Plan L."

And the outnumbered Earth ships, pulling in their horns of atomic bolts, flashed away from the darkness, their rocket exhausts spurting fire. They blasted into the sky in unison, climbing above the slower Mercurian ships, and hurtled downward, their blue bolts thrusting before them, lashing at the silver ships.

The Mercurian ships swung upward, lumbering, but the Earth ships were darting in and out like slashing knives wielded by agile, practiced hands.

Curt Wing's tight-held breath relaxed, made a whistling sound in the plotting room. He said, "The longest chance I ever took, and it worked." His voice was very low, almost like a prayer.

"Look at them run!" Packer chortled. "You did it again." He was staring into the visaplate, watching the silver ships begin to scatter away from the black Earth ships above them. "This is the knockout punch. We'll drive them away now, forever. Five years they've been nagging us and all the time they waited until they were strong enough to strike."

"Yes," said Wing, "and they almost got us in the slaughtering pit by the asteroid belt. But now . . ." He halted, snapped into the intercom:

"Attack at will, you itchy-fingered monkeys. They're all yours. Take 'em."

The oval door to the plotting room burst open; a big-framed, heavy-paunched Blackbeard came plowing in.

"Gee, Cap," his heavy voice lumbered. "I bin missing somepin, huh?"

Commander Wing turned to the newcomer. The harsh planes of his face softened as he grinned.

"Yes, Dead-Eye, I guess you bin missing something all right. Making love to Elizabeth again?"

DEAD-Eye Lindstrom grinned, his white square teeth glaring through the black of his bearded face.

"Yep, I sure have. Y'know, Cap, Elizabeth's coming along fine now. I jest got



Illustration by KIEMLE

through placing five out of six slugs in the bull's eye, and I warn't even looking. I jest grabbed leather and started fanning the hammer and whamo! Elizabeth put 'em right in thar."

Dead-Eye patted the bulky length of the archaic powder gun strapped to his right leg. Then he jerked his hand up quickly and the white steel of the ancient Frontier .44 revolver sparkled in the light.

"Pard," he said, "Pard, them were the days. You stood face to face with another owlhoot rider and reached. By gosh, you could see the whites of his eyes and whamo! You got him or he got you."

"Shut up, will you, Lindstrom?" Packer snapped. "You and your ancient history give me a pain. They buried the last beef striker—"

"Cowpuncher!" Dead-Eye corrected.

"Three hundred years ago," Packer went on. "And where you ever found that excuse for a pistol, only Neptune knows."

"Easy," said Curt Wing quietly.

Dead-Eye drew himself up to his six feet six so that he towered a full head over Lt. Packer. "Brother," he growled, and his pale blue eyes were cold, "I'll match you Elizabeth against any of these modern guns and I'll kill you so much quicker than you'll have to be cremated ahead of time. Why—"

The eerie whistle from the Earth panel halted him. The three turned at the summons, infraction of all space battle procedure except in cases of extreme urgency. Only once before in five years had that whistle sounded during either battle practice or battle. Then it was to announce war with Mercury.

Now . . .

The visaplate crawled up from black through purple to yellow and white. A voice came through but there was no face accompanying it.

"Signal six-two . . . signal six-two . . ."

"No!" Wing cried out.

"Signal six two . . . signal six two . . ."

Wing glanced at the battle viseplate. The Mercurians were in full rout.

We've got them licked, he thought; they're running.

Now this.

"Signal six two . . ." the Earth voice repeated.

Lt. Packer said, "Commander Wing,

what is signal six two? I thought there were only sixty-one code numbers."

Curt Wing looked at Packer but his dark eyes were blank, the lips thinned and harsh.

"Signal six two, lieutenant?" he asked, and there was no life in his voice. "It takes precedence over everything an Earthman has. Life, liberty, home, happiness—everything. We must return to Earth at once. To hell with the Mercurians. They're unimportant." Curt Wing spoke into the intercom:

"Commander to all ships. Abandon chase. Gain formation. We're returning to home base."

The formation board began to blink as ship captains acknowledged the order. But where each green light of acquiescence lighted up, below it came also the yellow light of query.

Wing pushed on the all-ship button on the officers' intercom system and said quietly:

"Signal six two—you know what that means." The yellow query lights went off immediately, the green ones blinked off, on, then off again.

"Yes," Wing said to Lt. Packer, "The Mercurians are unimportant compared to this. Signal six two is the emergency signal for earth catastrophe. What's wrong I don't know. But whatever it is, a mere interplanetary war is a kindergarten class." He ran his blunt-fingered hands through his hair.

"Gee, Cap," said Dead-Eye suddenly. "That's bad, huh?"

"Yes, Dead-Eye," Wing said softly. "It's bad. Very bad."

"You'll fix it, won't you, Cap?" Dead-Eye asked, and his light-blue eyes were trusting. "You can do anything, Cap. Why, didn't you find Elizabeth for me?"

Wing stared at Dead-Eye's hulking figure.

Finally he said, "I think this will be slightly more difficult than picking Elizabeth out of a museum case, Dead-Eye."

EARTH below them now, its diadem of clouds winking in the reflected shafts of light from the moon.

What danger lay there? What danger so great that they must let a victory become a might-have-been. What catastrophe so

important that a fight for interplanetary life was dismissed casually with the signal.

Curt Wing shrugged his shoulders, heard that incessant signal boring monotonously into his ears.

Then the breaking rockets were kicking, the high thin wail as the thickening atmosphere scratched along the black ship's bulk was deepening, and the deceleration was pushing lazy hands against him, urging him against the duralloy bulwark at his back.

"Gosh," Dead-Eye said, gaping open-mouthed into the visaplate. "Cap, looky here, the whole city is blue."

It was blue—this White City which in the long ago had been New York. A blue visible with an inner light of its own that absorbed the white moon beams and made black shadows blue.

THE city was like some huge blue flower, sunset blue for stamen and pistil, its hue lightening to aquamarine, cerulean, and pastel as its petals stretched farther out over the city. It was pulsing and each pulsation swelled its circumference.

Then the visaplate was flickering and the tiny red bulb centered in its plastic base began to blink, signaling power trouble. Then the screen went blank.

"What is it?" Packer exclaimed. His voice was loud and harsh in the plotting room now. The incessant signal six two . . . signal six two . . . had ceased. The instrument panel lights went dark, the rockets cut off abruptly, the only sound was the scrabbling fingers of the outside . . .

"Force field," Curt Wing said. "Something we've never been able to develop. But there it is. That's the catastrophe. It's swallowing White City, and if there's an intelligence behind it or not, mankind is done if we can't stop it."

"Force field?" Packer asked. "But didn't you . . .?"

"Yes," Wing said. "I created one once. A little thing less than an inch square. Balanced one magnetic field against another by firing four atomic guns at a coincident point. But a funny thing, the longer the field held the more power I had to shove into it."

"Then I didn't have any more power to give, and Dead-Eye says, 'Gee, what's happening to all those atoms?' So I grabbed him and ran like hell for the nearest sub-

basement. When those compressed atoms let go it tore everything loose from the experimental station.

"When Dead-Eye and I crawled out, all it was was a desert. There wasn't a tree, a bush, a rock or a hill for ten miles around. It was the flattest place I ever saw, or hope to see again." He was staring blankly at the insentient visaplate.

"But, hell, I talk too much."

Jake Wilson, landing supervisor, pushed open the oval hatch, said: "Hang on, sir, we're volplaning in. It's lucky we got the vanes out before the power quit."

The shock spilled the chunky Wilson into the plotting room, clipped the legs out from under the three already there.

There was a moment of lift, then another shock a little less severe. The ship lifted again, struck, lifted once more and settled with an audible groan of metal stress.

They hurried from the plotting room, heading for the exit lock.

It was a peculiar sort of night outside, a benevolent blue softening the blackness. Curt Wing stared at the blue halved city off to the west. He was licking his dry lips.

"Gosh, Cap," Dead-Eye asked suddenly. "What if *that* blows up?" A shudder quivered through his bulky frame.

Wing's dark eyes went blank. He put one hand on Dead-Eye's arm. He said nothing.

He was standing there, staring at the pulsating blue flower that was spreading out from the city, his fingers quiescent on Dead-Eye's arm when the red-uniformed riot officer jockeyed his speedy rocket car up to them . . .

The building was still untouched by the force field's encroaching maw. Curt Wing stood by the window staring out at the blue night scene. Finally he answered the men who sat at the long narrow table behind him.

"I don't know what we can do. My experiments with such a field taught me only that I could not control it once it was set in motion," he said quietly.

He turned then to face the men—the governors of the seven divisions of earth. "You have flattered me because of an experiment that ended in failure," he went on. "But even if we had a solution, a way

to overcome this impossibility, we must not forget that is only one problem. We have this unknown to lick, yes; but meanwhile the Mercurians we left out by the moon can punch us to stardust."

JAN ELIEL, senior governor, shook his white head quickly. "No, we have only this force field with which to contend. We have nothing to worry about from the Mercurians. We gave them Earth's unconditional surrender only minutes after you were ordered back."

"Huh?" The exclamation, shot through with amazement, exploded from the shadows in the corner where Dead-Eye had buried himself. "Why, you!"

"Quiet, Dead-Eye!" Wing barked. Dead-Eye subsided, grumbling.

Wing's face had drained of color, the sharp planes of his face came into sharper relief, the muscles in his throat were working pulsating as if he could not catch a full breath.

His mind was shrieking. It's gone, Curt Wing! The loveliest world in the galaxy no longer belongs to Earthmen. It is owned by strangers, by Mercurians, by an alien people who will grind its beauty into a molten crucible so that it may support their hell-hot lives.

Gone! Everything worth fighting for, living for, dying for! Earth, who had flung her minions to the stars, first beings in the galaxy to solve space travel, first to probe across eternity in rickety ships, spanning the vast distances with blood and broken lives. Earth, who had struggled to bring her peoples together in peaceful harmony, finally succeeding in it, lifting them toward their destiny.

All this—Gone.

Curt Wing looked at the seven governors.

"If that's the case," he said finally. "I can't see any reason why we should worry about the force field. Let the damn Mercurians worry about it. Earth is theirs now."

"Wait, Wing!" Eliel cried out as Wing strode past the long narrow table, Dead-Eye's bulk dogging his heels. "You don't understand!"

Wing spun around. "I don't understand?" he repeated, and his deep voice was harsh.

"Look, you governors. There was only

one way Earth could have licked this force field. Someone would have found the way out—the way to chop this blue flower off at its source if you hadn't taken it away.

"Scan back through Earth's history. Way back in the 15th century, a sea captain did the impossible. He crossed water as vast to him as space once was to us. He had a way. Earthmen flung their power at a dictator called Schickelgruber or some such name. It had been impossible to stop him. But a way was found.

"Then the moon rocket. That was impossible, too. There was no way to break gravity chains without killing any living thing on the ship. But a way was found. Oh, there are scores of instances where Earthmen did the impossible. But they had something worth fighting for. Columbus his adopted country; the united nations their people; Dawson and his moon rocket, the welfare of a world.

"We had Earth. Now what have we got? Not a mote of dust to call our own. I don't understand! Hell, I hope the Mercurians use you to fire those ghastly gas pots they use here to keep Earth's air from poisoning them."

Space Commander Curt Wing was balanced on the balls of his feet, leaning forward now, breathing hard, his fine-muscled body quivering as his dark eyes burned at the seven governors.

Jan Eliel said quietly, "We know how you feel, Curt Wing. But there wasn't anything else we could do. Wait!" He held up his hand as Wing threatened to interrupt him.

"We were like the fellow in the old story who stood at the gates of hell. He was damned if he opened the door and damned if he didn't.

"We had two alternatives—an unknown enemy and a known enemy, and we needed time, so we chose to capitulate to Mercury. We recognized the blue flower for what it was—and we needed you. Until you switched from building atomics to piloting them, you had made the greatest advance in the force field.

"We have time now—precious little since it will be only two weeks before the Mercurian fleet arrives with Mercury's Zhan Nekel. Earth still is ours. If you can solve the force field, we need not lose. We can turn it upon the Mercurians.



They have fought with deceit and in this we must deceive them."

Jan Eliel sat up stiffly in his chair. "Will you desert us, Curt Wing?"

Wing's relaxed figure was their answer. The boyish grin which wiped the harsh planes of his face into softness was his promise. But Dead-Eye added emphasis, dragging his powder gun from his belt and waving it,

"Elizabeth and me'll help!" he declared.

THE electric clock whirred softly—like a breathless metronome keeping time with Curt Wing's pencil. The metal desk was littered with crumpled and half-crum-

pled sheets of paper. Wing's black hair was rumpled and awry, his face dirtier by a ragged growth of beard, and when he lifted his aching eyes to the clock, they were blood-shot and watery with strain.

Behind him, the door sighed softly as it closed. Aware of a presence, but too weary to turn around Wing asked:

"Dead-Eye?"

"No," a quiet voice answered. Then a laugh, soft, so soft—like the whisper of leaves at nightfall, the murmuring of water sprites dancing on moonlit waters. Memory of a day—that day.

"Get out," Curt Wing said flatly. He did not look around.

"I won't go, Curt." That voice again—her voice. I didn't think it would ever hurt me again. I had it licked. I was living, Now—

Then that lovely, remembered presence was warning that ache, that cold, bitter ache in his heart, soothing it. But her words—those words which had turned him from science to adventure—stayed frozen in his heart.

"You're not a man, Curt Wing. You're a machine. You're too sufficient unto yourself. You don't need me. Your life is just a mixture of metal, paper and pencils. You just want me because you think a man should have a mate. So make one out of your metal, paper and pencils!"

CURT WING stared wryly at the pencil held motionless between his thumb and forefinger. He forgot for a moment that into those fingers had been given the solution of an impossible problem—forgot that to him had been delegated a task so important that every second he relaxed meant the blue flower of destruction was spreading and Zhan Nekel's Mercurian fleet sped closer to Earth.

She was his own personal problem, breaking out from beneath the hard shell of pain he had built up within him. But his problem meant nothing at all if Earth no longer belonged to Earthmen. He had wanted her so much—still wanted her!—that there were times when he wanted to break down and bawl like a baby. Like now . . .

Then Curt Wing was chuckling. I'm feeling sorry for myself! At a time when there's no time for self-pity or anything else but work.

He turned around quickly. She still stood there just inside the door. She was more beautiful than he remembered! Her soft brown hair that felt like gossamer when it brushed against his lips; her blue eyes that could speak of love and hate, of pleasure and disgust so eloquently her lips need not move; the soft oval of her face—it was all that he remembered and more . . .

But he said,

"Business, Miss Packer?" There was no softness in the harsh planes of his face and his dark eyes were blank.

"No, Curt, not business."

"If you'll excuse me then?" Wing said,

raising his eyebrows. "There's no time for anything else."

She smiled. "It won't take long, Curt. I just wanted to tell you something before it's too late."

"You never did and never will need me. I don't need you. But I hurt you, you hurt me, too, because I've loved you ever since you and dad first started your force field experiments."

"I still love you, you sweet fool!"

Then she was gone. Wing's cry, "Pat!" struck the closed door.

Wing hurled himself toward the door. Then stopped short as a sleepy "Whassa matter, Curt?" growled out of the corner where Dead-Eye had been napping.

"Nothing," Wing said abruptly. Then: "I thought you went home hours ago."

Rubbing bleary eyes and pulling on his beard, Dead-Eye, grinning through the black mass, said, "I pretended to, but I thought you might need me and Elizabeth for sumpin'."

Wing glanced at the metal desk, heaped with the paper covered with a thousand figures he had set down as he tried again and again to find where in the long ago he had made his mistake in creating his field. If Prof. Packer were still alive, he could find that error. If I can only solve that maybe I can build up a neutralizing field.

"Come on, Dead Eye, my brain's dulled with too much paper work. Let's go take a first hand look at that damn blue flower."

The blue flower was pulsing faster now, Wing decided, as he and Dead Eye approached a police captain who was direct-clothing and valuables, toward the line of rocket buses.

Wing looked into the hazy depths of the force field.

Were those figures moving about in there? Or was his tired brain playing tricks on him?

"Gee, Cap," Dead Eye exclaimed. "There's somebody inside!"

The police captain moved up to them. "We've reported what you see, Commander," he said. "They only became noticeable a half hour ago. But it didn't seem possible there *could* be any life in there."

"Life within that death?" Wing repeated. His blood-shot eyes peered at the police captain. "I don't see why not. Whoever

created it must be able to handle it. They must have some protection, some armor against it. If we could capture one."

"That's it," the captain said. "They're inside and they won't come out. Before, those shadows looked like some sort of beings. They're dimmer now. They walk upright in a sort of shuffle, but they won't come out of the flower."

"If we could entice one of them out somehow," Wing said softly. "If we knew what they were, it might help us find a way of throttling that flower before it destroyed anything else."

THE captain grinned ruefully. "We've tried everything to dent that field, and it didn't even change color. I guess maybe we'll just have to wait until they decide to come out, huh, Commander?"

Wing grinned back at the captain. "Maybe we ought to let sleeping dogs lie, Captain? Maybe you're right, but if one of them even looks like he intends to come out, buzz me on the visaplate at once."

Wing and Dead Eye moved away from the captain, watched the red-clad police herd more homeless families into the rocket buses for transportation to other points. But unless that blue flower is killed, Wing thought, they can go to the far ends of the earth and they'll never escape it. And if they try to escape to other worlds the Mercurians will be their Nemesis.

Wing and Dead Eye were threading their way through the crowd when the shout reached them:

"Commander, one's coming out!"

Wing spun and sprinted back toward the captain, Dead Eye's big heavy bulk lumbering behind him. Wing's atomic pistol was clutched in his hand as he jarred to a stop beside the captain. His eyes followed the pointing red arm.

One's coming out!

Tensely, Wing waited, aware of Dead Eye's labored breathing beside him, of the pounding of his own heart, of the sudden quiet among the police and their homeless charges.

What was it? Did it hold the answer he and the Council of Seven were seeking? Would Earth be free of this voracious flower? Could the Mercurians be stopped before it was too late? Would it give up its secret which meant so much to Earth

—and Pat's sweet face was smiling at him—and him?

One shadow was growing more distinct as it moved toward the rim of the blue force field. It shuffled along slowly, like an Earth diver moving across the ocean floor. Wing was aware of the police captain's gestures, drawing up a squad of red-clad police with their atomic rifles at the ready.

The shadow moved closer to the outside. As it approached, the blue flower immediately before it began to dim, to grow black as if some intangible hole were opening to let it through.

Then the shadow-thing was outside the blue flower.

The police captain's thumb pointed down. Atomic lightning from the police rifles lashed at the shadow-thing.

Wing saw the lethal bolts strike the shadow. Then a blast of sound and light deluged him, spinning him off his feet, hurling him against a blackness shot through with pain and searing heat.

The pain and the heat were still branded on his mind—raw wounds that made him want to scream out in protest—as he crept slowly back to awareness of the things around him.

His ears came to life first—and he heard the voice whispering over and over again. "Oh, Curt. Oh, Curt." Then his skin was responding to the warm, vibrant fingers caressing his cheek. Into his nostrils came the sweet scent of her loveliness. His eyes opened and he saw the soft brown head cradled on his breast.

Then his mind brushed aside the memory of pain and heat.

"We failed, didn't we?" He didn't recognize the broken, almost lifeless voice as his own.

Pat lifted her head. She didn't need to speak, not when her blue eyes were so eloquent.

"Dead Eye?" Wing asked.

"Don't you fret, Captain. I'm all in one piece, even if Elizabeth did give me six nasty powder burns on my leg."

Curt Wing wearily turned his bandaged head, beheld a mound of bandages sprawled atop the bed beside him.

"You sure look like a hangover, Dead Eye," Wing observed. Then: "Was it bad, Pat?"

She nodded. "Only a half dozen out of all those hundreds escaped. Most of them were killed in the explosion. The medics don't know how any one came out alive—especially you and Dead Eye. You were right in the center of the blast."

"Well," Wing observed, and it was an effort to speak lightly, but something had to be done about the horror in her voice, "I don't feel the least bit alive. Maybe I'm a ghost."

Her laughter was a relief, but a little too full for such a flimsy joke. So he said:

"I suppose the shadow-thing wasn't harmed." It was more a statement than a question.

"No," she said flatly. And in the same flat voice, added, "I'd better go. You need rest and quiet."

"Wait," he called. But she was gone. "Pat," he called out, once, twice. That unemotional voice was a dead give away. Something worse had happened and she didn't dare tell him.

CURT WING dragged his body out of the bed. It screamed in agonized protest. Somehow, his mind held together against the shock and hurt that poured into it as he pulled his body upright, focused his eyes, looking for something to wear instead of the brief hospital garment.

Dead Eye, from the next bed, asked weakly, "Where you going, Cap?" Wing didn't answer. He was delving into a wall locker, dragging out a burnt tunic, finding torn and broken sandals.

A white-gowned nurse barred his way in the hall.

"You can't leave, Commander. In your condition, you'll kill yourself," she said gently.

"Why not?" Wing grated. "I should be dead anyway. What's a few more minutes more or less? Life won't be any fun anyway if Earth is lost." He had to use his hand to guide himself along the wall as he pushed his weary, beaten body toward outside.

Behind him, he heard Dead Eye calling, "Wait for me and Elizabeth, Cap. We're coming, too."

Outside, it was raining—unobtrusively but relentlessly. The early afternoon was drab, but in the little park across the hos-

pital courtyard, there was color. The circular beds of pink roses, of multi-colored pansies, of bluebells seemed brighter for the rain which beat so gently at them.

Wing heard the muted twittering of birds as he stood on the hospital steps. He looked up into the lowering sky and let the raindrops beat at his bandaged face. The door behind him opened and Dead Eye came stumbling out.

Wing breathed deeply of the wet air, felt it clearing the heat and pain from his mind.

He looked at Dead Eye, then toward the east where the blue radiance suffused the sky.

"Let's go," he said simply.

They hadn't trudged far in the rain before they found out what Pat Packer's unemotional voice had meant.

Terror was riding through the city, whipping the men and women of Earth into madness and death.

As the two of them moved closer to the edge of the blue flower, wild-eyed humans fled past them, casting fearful glances behind.

These panic-stricken humans ran silently, except for the gasps which burst from tortured throats. Abandoned children sobbed as they ran, not knowing nor caring where they went—driven by the fear of what was behind them.

Behind them, flames from burning houses were growing brighter and dull explosions were growing louder. Soon there were no more humans running, but as Wing Commander Curt Wing and Dead Eye plodded on, they saw charred and broken corpses and the smell of burnt flesh was mingling with the stench of wood and plastic and paint.

And then Wing and Dead Eye saw *Them*.

They numbered in the hundreds—spreading in a long single line—moving sluggishly but steadily, bolts of blue flame flaring out ahead of them. The flashing blue bolts melted steel, sent plastic into exploding drops of fire, touched and charred humans who still moved in their path.

Wing dragged Dead Eye out of the deserted street into a low shop building. They moved to a window and watched those blue bolts leap overhead to jab at building or human somewhere

back from where they had just come.

"What are they?" Dead Eye asked, peering at the thin line moving closer. "They're nothing but shadows, looks like."

"Another dimension," Wing suggested. "Probably on a higher plane than our own. Maybe that's why they're just shadows to us."

Dear God, he thought, what has humanity done to deserve this? We cannot fight them. We don't know what they are. Somehow, though, we must beat them. Earth must not die, not now, when we are on the very threshold of destiny.

We've come from the mud and slime of a new born Earth, clawed and fought our way out of nothing to start reaching for the stars. Is this our destiny—to come so far and then be snuffed out before we even realize our talents?

"We've got to beat them, Dead Eye," Wing said harshly.

"Don't worry, Cap," Dead Eye urged. "Shucks, they can't be so tough that they can lick us. Besides, Cap, us Earthmen always fight better when the going's rough. Why, just give me and Elizabeth a chance at them. We'll knock 'em dead."

Wing's dark eyes were soft as they looked at Dead Eye's earnest, bearded face.

"We sure will, Dead Eye," he said. "We sure will knock 'em dead."

That is, Wing amended, staring at the relentless shadows as they moved slowly toward their haven, if *They* don't knock us dead first.

Wing and Dead Eye hugged the buildings as they retreated. They picked their way along the rubble-strewn streets, their nostrils quivering at the intermingled odor of death, burnt flesh, charred and rain-wet wood.

Ahead and behind them as they retreated, the flashing bolts of the shadow-things smashed buildings, leveled the trees along the boulevard, sending them up in puffs of white smoke and flame, heaving up the walks as tree roots exploded.

The rain was turning heavier now, turning chill, soaking through their own burnt and tattered clothes. It was relentless, that rain, almost as if it were bent upon breaking the spirit of man as the shadow-things were rending and tearing the flesh.

The two limped on alone, ahead of the advancing shadow line. They walked alone

through death and destruction as man's promise and hope darkened.

We're walking toward the end of our world, Wing thought. We'll soon be nothing but dust motes kicked up by the tread of a new, more powerful race.

The hell of it is, we're not even fighting back. Why, he thought in amazement, we're not even trying any more.

"Dead Eye," he asked suddenly. "What are we running away for?"

Dead Eye's slumped figure straightened suddenly. "Gee, Cap, I was wondering when you'd begin wondering about that. You ain't been acting natural at all. We never ran away from a fight before. Let's go knock 'em dead right now, huh, Cap?"

Wing looked at Elizabeth, strapped snugly to Dead Eye's left hip, then at his own two empty bandaged hands.

"Well, Dead Eye, here, as your owlhoot pard would say, 'here goes nuttin'."

Not for many days had Curt Wing felt such a sense of peace and relief as he did that moment when he turned back toward the unknown and implacable enemy. Deep inside he was chuckling. It was silly for the two of them to march against the shadows. Silly, sure, his proud spirit admitted, but wasn't that the way of man?

Wasn't it man's way to thumb his nose at impossibilities and forge ahead? It wasn't a matter of winning, really, but having the guts to go ahead and try.

Dead Eye snapped open the cylinder of his powder gun, observed candidly: "I hope I don't get rattled again and try to shoot my toes off. Those six slugs jerked out of Elizabeth so fast before that there explosion I couldn't even control her at all."

They moved back deeper into hell.

All around them buildings, trees, streets and sidewalks were being flung about as the power of the shadows smashed. The rain was coming down in torrents now, and the two of them could barely see a few feet ahead.

But always they knew where the shadows were—the slashing bolts pointed them out unerringly. They were very close to that unseen line of shadows. The thunder of those bolts was rending the air and mixing in the fresh smell of ozone with the pall of smoke and putrid smells which even the driving rain could not beat to earth.

Suddenly, Wing and Dead Eye stopped. It was as if they had walked into a solid wall. But this wall was different. It pushed them backward easily, although they strove to move ahead.

"A HARMLESS force wall," Wing said in answer to Dead Eye's query. "But we can't get through. There goes our grand gesture, Dead Eye. We can hardly thumb our noses while we're being pushed backward."

"Huh!" grunted Dead Eye. "I'll fix 'em." He levelled Elizabeth, aimed her into the unseen obstacle. His thumb flicked at the hammer, and Elizabeth's gruff voice broke through the cacophony of noise with amazing clarity. He strode forward, Wing beside him, and blasted at the invisible wall.

Of a sudden, the noise was gone. Wing halted in amazement. The tremendous symphony of sound which had been pounding at his ears now miraculously was stilled.

Elizabeth's last shot still echoed, but the crash of masonry and plastic, the scream of tortured steel, the growling crackling of the shadows bolts, the snapping as fire gulped at wood and inflammables—all these were gone.

But while they still marveled at this change from noise to silence, something happened. They were thrown off their feet, and they once more found themselves out in the noise and fire.

No more had they picked themselves up from the rubble than the invisible wall was nudging at them again, shoving them ahead of it.

The insentient wall kept nudging them backward—ever backward until there was no longer any sense of time or place to them. A confused roar of crashing buildings, explosions, groans of tortured metal; an indiscriminate blend of smells, of smoke, fire, charred flesh and wood; a heterogeneous awareness of pain, cold heat; a knowledge that this, for Earthmen, was the end.

What did it matter now that Zhan Nekel and his rocket fleet thundered ever closer to Earth? That Pat, who had come back with her promise of happiness, loved him? What did anything matter anymore, except dying like an Earthman should—in the ruins of his world, still trying to lick something so much stronger than his greatest

effort was breath against a cylinder?

Curt Wing stumbled, fell. Then the force wall was rolling over him over and over, always back, back. The broken pavement, the shattered rubble pounded and tore at his already burned and battered body.

Then suddenly:

"Here they are, Pat!" The voice cut through into his dulled mind. A powerful light, hurting his eyes, struck at him, and in its reflection he caught sight of a figure in space blues, gargoyle eyes glinting. Lt. Packer! Packer shouted:

"Swing the rocket car around, Pat. Quick! Something's shoving Curt and Dead Eye around and it might upset the car."

His light suddenly twisted crazily and Packer grunted, "Damn, it's like a moving wall." Then Packer swung back, lifted Wing to his feet, dragged him ahead of the crawling wall. Wing felt the heat of the rocket exhaust, muted by its muffler, fan his cheek. Then he was inside the car. Moments later, Dead Eye's heavy bulk followed him, and Packer was leaping in with them, urging:

"Get going, Pat, but watch out for those rubble piles and holes." Then, in the bucking car, Packer was tearing open a package of antiseptic drug needles. Wing felt the sting in his neck, and the dullness and pain were fleeing from his mind.

"You're a couple of space zanies," Packer muttered, yanking the gargoyle-like smoke glasses from his eyes and pulling off his space crash-helmet. "Pat almost went crazy when she found you'd left the hospital. We've been searching for you ever since in this hell. It was only luck Pat spotted you with the infra-red, or you'd be rolling still."

Curt Wing leaned back against the car cushion. "Well, Lieutenant," he said, "I might as well be rolling still for all the good I can do against these shadow-things." He lifted his bandaged head, his dark eyes almost black now with weariness and hate of the beings who were casually flicking man into the limbo of forgotten things.

"You know what we're up against, don't you, George?" he asked. From the pilot seat, Pat said bitterly:

"We know, Curt. The whole world knows. The telecasts have been bombard-

ing the world with it ever since the first shadow came out and hurled our own destruction back at us a hundred-fold."

George Packer added, "I was recruited to pull our biggest space guns out and hook them up on land rockets. The ships can't rise, somehow, and when we've called for ships from other points, they get so close and then their power gives out."

"But, gee," put in Dead Eye, "this car's running. How come?"

"Don't know why, Dead Eye," Packer added. "These, of course, don't have the new cyc motors; still run on the old communion principle. The force field probably neutralizes the cycs, but doesn't faze the firing gas in the cars."

"The space guns didn't help, I suppose?" Wing asked.

"No," Packer said, twisted his face ruefully. "The shadows thrived on it and threw our bolts back ten times as hard. It wasn't nice to see."

"Sometimes," he said, wistfully, "I wish we were back in your beef-striker—sorry, Dead Eye—cow-puncher days. It was man to man then, and you knew that it wasn't the weapon but the wielder." He ran his hands through his tousled blond hair.

"Yep," said Dead Eye. "Elizabeth and me'd fix 'em if we could see 'em."

THE bucketing car began to have smoother going; the darkness outside was lifting, and the beat of the rain seemed to decelerate.

In the comparative quiet and peace, Curt Wing's dulled mind, clarified by the stimulating drug, was beginning to work again; his spirit numbed and beaten down by pain and inability to solve the enigma of the shadows and their weapons was lifting itself, shaking itself from its lethargy, as something stirred within.

Just that buoyant spirit of man which refused to admit defeat? Wing was wondering. Or was despair so deep that I couldn't go any deeper so I have to come up toward hope again?

The rocket car suddenly sloughed to a stop.

"Sorry," Pat said softly, and laughed. There was a note of hysteria in that laugh. "But we're surrounded." The three men peered out through the plastic windshield.

The shadow things were ahead, moving toward them.

But no destruction was spitting from those ghostly figures. For the first time, Curt Wing had a chance to observe closely.

They seemed about the height of a man—but distorted like a man's shadow falling before him as he trudged up a hill with the sun behind. Yet not so distinct. They wavered, too, within themselves, although the outline remained constant.

The rain was only a light patter now and the sky was brightening as the three men and one woman crawled out of the rocket car. The shadows were very close now, but there still was no sign that their weapons would speak.

Silently the shadows moved, scores of them. That straight line they made began to bend and curve around the four who stood waiting.

No threatening gestures, no weapons visible, just that relentless, closing circle.

"Damn you," said Dead Eye suddenly. "Elizabeth didn't get a chance at you before. But she will now."

"No!" Curt Wing snapped. "I think they want to take us alive. Maybe we can learn something. No, Dead Eye, no!"

But it was too late.

Dead Eye had snapped his ancient powder gun from its holster, and his left hand was fanning Elizabeth's sharp-biting tongue. The hammer snapped down thrice—three shots blasted out.

In that breathless second before the awful blast of sound and light struck, Curt Wing saw three shadows suddenly disappear. Then the sound and light struck as Wing steeled his muscles and mind against it. But, amazingly, at the first touch, it was gone, and he was standing unharmed.

He twisted his head. Pat was standing close beside him, and George. But Dead Eye was gone. Only Elizabeth, her metal twisted and white hot, lay smoking on the ground where Dead Eye had stood.

Dead Eye, Wing's mind was crying, you big, dumb, blundering bear, where are you? Oh, you damn fool, pitting an old, crazy powder gun against atomic power! You killed yourself, you crazy, gallant guy. Now you're gone—who am I going to have to look out for after this?

Pat's fingers were soft on his arm, drawing him back from the pain of the loss. "He

always wanted it that way, Curt. Quick, while he was in action."

Rage began to boil in Wing's heart against these tenuous shadows who scorned giving an Earthman even a hopeless chance. The ache for Dead Eye, who was like a big good-natured puppy; that ever-conscious nagging of the doom of mankind at the hands of these callous shadows; the knowledge that even if this doom could be somehow stopped or turned aside there was Zhan Nekel's space fleet coming nearer, churned his mind. And from his whirling brain came only one driving thought. Avenge Dead Eye—the thousands of Dead Eyes who never would have the chance for their simple joys and pleasures if man knuckled down under this greatest threat!

With that rage came clear thinking. Little things—like Dead Eye's firing into the invisible wall, combustion type engines firing when cyc-powered units went dead, shadows disappearing when Elizabeth spat at them; little things, simple things.

A thought coalescing, growing sharper, until it was burning in his mind, fueling his spirit with new hope.

"Thank you, Dead Eye," he whispered. The harsh sharp planes of Curt Wing's face were softening.

"We've got a chance," he said. "Dead Eye gave it to us, Pat. But we've got to get away—out of this circle somehow." He waved his hands at the tight circle of shadow-things that hemmed them in. "Any ideas, George? Pat?"

Lt. George Packer's shoulders had come up, he was touched by this new assurance in Curt Wing's voice, in the fire of those dark eyes. "Not," he said, and there was new life in his voice, too, "not unless an old wish comes true and the ground swallows us up."

"It can," Pat said, the words tumbling out. "We can fall in a hole, can't we? Look at them, Curt. They shuffle along, but they don't step into holes. They just float over them—like they do belong in another dimension and can't anchor themselves to Earth. See?" Her voice rang with excitement.

Wing laughed. "But what good would falling in a hole do us? All they'd have to do is fish us out again. And we'd have new bruises." The circle was tight now, and suddenly they felt the push of an in-

visible wall against them as the shadow-things moved closer. Then they were moving.

Pat didn't stop arguing. "If you were a fat man and you dropped something between your feet, wouldn't you have to get your stomach out of the way to see it?"

Wing looked at her sharply. "What are you driving at, Pat?"

"If they're from another dimension, and all the telecast say they are, and if their vision devices for this world are just for straight-ahead seeing, what would they have to do in order to look down?"

"Pat," Wing said softly. "It would be like riding in a rocket car. Once something gets underneath it, out of the range of the windshield, you can't see it. You have to back up or go forward. And if we pick a deep enough hole, the shadows can't back enough or go forward enough to see the bottom. Is that what you mean? Because the high sides cut off their vision?"

Her wide smile and sparkling eyes were his answer.

CURT WING, nursing a new set of bruises after plunging into a fifteen-foot hole and scrambling out after the shadow-things had finally floated by above them, led Pat and lanky George Packer at a loping run back to the rocket car.

It was almost nightfall and the fire and noise and stench of White City were far behind them by the time the speedy little car made it to the mountain retreat of the Council of Seven.

During the ride, Curt Wing's sense of loss with Dead Eye gone was softening, mingling with a gratitude deep and strong to the big, black-bearded giant.

With a child's intuition for solving a problem simply, Dead Eye and his Elizabeth had given man a chance to fight.

"A chance, Curt?" Pat had overheard his whisper. Her hand on his arm was warm and vibrant. Curt clasped his fingers softly over hers.

"Yes," he said, "if there is only time."

Jan Eliel, senior governor of the Council of Seven, pulled his red-rimmed eyes from the telecast when Curt Wing and Pat and Lt. Packer entered the consultation room.

Old as his face had stamped him those few days ago when Wing had brought the fleet back, Jan Eliel now was a broken and

bent caricature of the man who held the direction of a world in his hands.

"Yes?" he asked, and the life was out of his voice.

Then he saw the four miniature earths which still glinted proudly in a row across Wing's torn and burnt tunic's left breast.

"Wing!" He rose from his seat on the telecast bench, hurried forward. "You've solved it!"

Wing shook his bandaged head. "I don't know for sure, Governor, but I think we do have a way of stopping the shadows—if there's time."

Jan Eliel ran a shaking hand through his white hair.

"I don't know. Zhan Nekel's fleet is moving faster than we thought it would, and the fleet units you smashed at the Moon have been re-organized and now are swinging toward us. That, at the most, gives us two days—and I thought we'd have at least two weeks.

"But enough of that; what is the way to stop these terrible shadows?"

Instead of answer, Wing asked:

"How much of that obsolete Twentieth century artillery is available?"

Jan Eliel's old eyes widened.

"You're mad, Curt Wing," he said wearily. "We've tried everything we have, the finest weapons, the heaviest atom machines, and we get nothing in return except our own power turned against us. Powder would be worse than useless. You can't stop atomic power with an old-fashioned shell."

"My friend Dead Eye was killed when he proved you can," Wing said quietly.

JAN ELIEL'S voice was cold. He spoke quite without emotion. "You've been under too heavy a strain, Space Commander Wing. You are not the clear-headed Wing we once knew. Go back to the hospital and rest. Perhaps you will be able to bring back some semblance of sanity and help your world when she needs you most."

"Damn you," Wing said. "Can't you see it? We've been throwing atomic power at an atomic shield, so it just bounces back at us. Suppose we threw something it couldn't bounce back right away, leaving us an opening to hurl our own atomic bolts into the heart of it?"

Jan Eliel had turned his back on them, once more was watching the telecast.

What's the use, Curt Wing? Why bother when the ruler of the world won't listen to what a big, blundering guy proved when he got mad and fired an old powder gun at a shadow? He's blinded as you were not so long ago by despair. Follow Dead Eye's lead, show him the way and he may follow.

"Come on," Wing said abruptly. "We have a job to do."

The long low barracks at the Spacers' Training school outside Washington buzzed and growled with the hundreds of blue-uniformed spacers.

There at the far end of the hall on the little platform where the sergeants took the roll, Wing stood looking at the hard-bitten, space-burned men who had been land-bound since they turned from victory to answer that fatal six two . . .

They had come because their commander had offered them a fight; a little different perhaps using old-fashioned projectile weapons, but nevertheless a fight; and they, who had used space guns against the shadow-things, who had been beaten back without a chance to fight, were spoiling for battle.

Some of them were reading the hastily-printed instructions that came with the bright, shining, but outmoded weapons. Some were a little jealous of other comrades who even now were hurling their atomic bolts through the skies over Earth as they harassed the vanguard of Zhan Nekel's Mercurian fleet.

But with the pangs of jealousy they had pride in themselves, too. While their shipmates battled a known enemy, they were going out to fight against an unknown enemy with untried weapons and only the promise of their Space Commander, Curt Wing, that these weapons, three centuries old, could win where atomics had so miserably failed.

Wing raised his hand for attention.

"Some of you knew Dead Eye and his Elizabeth. He's gone now, but he destroyed three of the shadow-things with leaden pellets from his old sixshooter before he died. He showed me the way to lick those shadows. Simply, it's this. A concentration of powder can open a hole in the atomic shield of the shadows. But

in our atomic weapons we have a flow of power and it's sucked away by the shield before it can concentrate.

"In Elizabeth, Dead Eye had concentrated power—the leaden projectile. Its comparatively inert atoms struck the shield and broke through before it could be spread out evenly over the shield.

"For a moment, the shield was out of balance. That's your job and mine—keep that shield out of balance until we can find the invaders within and destroy them.

"I realize that you've had only five days to study what these old weapons are and how they operate—but we haven't any more time. We've got to lick an enemy from outside and an enemy from within at one and the same time.

"Do you think we can do it?"

A roar of assent greeted him.

They numbered in the thousands. Space rovers of the Twenty-fourth century, moving in a long, spread out line toward the edge of the blue flower that still pulsed and grew, reaching farther and farther out from White City.

Curt Wing's heart was filled with pride—pride in these thousands who, with strange, obsolete arms, were moving against a shadowy foe equipped with weapons the like of which they'd never dreamed; pride in that unbeatable spirit and courage of man, the magnificent fool, who had lifted himself by his own bootstraps from the caves of Earth to the vast reaches of the stars!

It was Curt Wing's powder gun which opened the attack when they struck against the invisible force barrier.

In the dawn light, all up and down that long thin line, the powder guns began snapping and crackling. Tommy guns, rifles and revolvers hurled their slugs at the wall.

THE long line kept moving forward. Wing snapped on the portable radio phone strapped across his chest, and at his words, far behind him, a dozen space cruisers—those which could be spared from the battle against the Mercurians above Earth—rose and soon were scintillating in the rays of a sun still hidden by the rim of Earth.

As the line of marching men strode forward, the cruisers, their rocket motors

vibrating the air, circled high above them.

The line reached the edge of the flower—and the intensity of the firing increased until it was the steady roll of a thousand drums.

Wing spoke into the phone again as the flower grew bluer along the edge. The blue deepened and deepened until it was almost black. Then Wing spoke into the phone once more.

The circling cruisers steadied. Their blue bolts spat at the blackness.

The shock of it could be seen for miles in the blue flower. The shield blackened in scattered spots. Where every black spot showed, the bolts from the Earth ships lashed.

The terrible power unleashed inside the shield began to show as the flower shrunk back into itself.

The ground smoked and trembled as it emerged from the retreating force field; great fissures opened and the ground trembled and shook as if in the grip of an earthquake.

Wing snapped a halt order to the captains on either side of him and the word moved rapidly down the line.

Bracing themselves against the shock of the quake, they waited.

It wasn't for long.

In the brightening day ahead of them, on the leveled plain behind them, the Earthmen saw the shadow-things approaching, their power bolts lashing out ahead of them. Every other man turned, so that half of them faced the shadows ahead and half the shadows behind.

The powder guns crashed, and the steel and lead and copper pellets whined a song of death in the ranks of the shadows.

The mist things exploded and disappeared as the multi-shaped spawn of Dead Eye's Elizabeth struck their shields.

Like puncturing a kid's balloon with a needle, Curt Wing thought. He was laughing now—man had risen once again from the dust. No longer need he despair. He had been stopped only momentarily in his climb toward destiny. After this unbelievable enemy, the Mercurians would be, perhaps not simply, but finally, hurled back to their hell-pot planet.

It was a tired and weary Curt Wing who threaded his way through the smoking ash of what had been one of the mightiest

of Earth cities. He moved toward the church, which stood so remarkably untouched by the tremendous forces which had been unleashed within the blue flower.

The two powder-burned and dirty spacemen who flanked the steel portals saluted him as he walked tiredly up the stone steps.

"Who phoned me?" Wing asked.

The redhead at the left of the portal saluted.

"I did, Commander. Jack and I saw this thing and we pecked inside and saw that funny light, so we thought we'd better call you."

Wing moved through the steel portals, stood in the quiet hush of the church. There, just before the altar rail was the curious blue light—like a hexagon of blue.

He walked slowly toward it and as he approached, the altar behind it seemed to fade away and he was looking into a silver hallway.

He halted within a foot of it. It was like looking through a doorway—why, it is a doorway, the doorway to the world these invaders came from!

He unsheathed the revolver, spun the cylinder to see that it was loaded, and with only a glimpse over his shoulder at the two spacemen silhouetted in the church doorway, he stepped through.

IT was like stepping through fire—a fire that clawed and tore at the heart of him—but it lasted only a moment.

The hallway in which he found himself was of silver, tiny overlapping bits of silver plating that rippled and cast off flashes of light. He walked slowly ahead to the other doorway he saw before him.

Framed in the door, he looked above him, through a glass roof, up into a strange star-studded night sky.

Where is this world? Curt Wing wondered. Have I crossed a thousand, a million or a trillion light years to come here?

He looked down from the night-sky and the vastness of the transparent roof reached as far his eyes could see.

It was only a whisper in his mind at first—then it grew stronger until it was as if his ears were hearing it.

"You're a man," the thought said. Curt Wing's dark eyes cast about for the source of it.

"You're a man," the emotionless thought

repeated. "That is why we could not beat you. We are a dying race, trapped on a dying world. You are young and have your destiny still before you."

"Who are you?" Wing's mind called out. "Where are you?"

"We were never beaten until now. We knew that to survive this dying system we must fight across eternity to find another sun and another system. We started from mud and slime like you, and some day you too must come to this—the end of your destiny."

"You will fight as we have fought. We built a machine to warp space. For centuries our scientists labored to perfect it, just as other technicians created a space scanner to find a world suitable to us."

Curt Wing was trembling as he listened. Somehow, the measured cadence of those cold thoughts was fingering his heart, bringing a chill to it.

"We found your world—the world of man, Earth, but we didn't know it until now."

"We made a mistake—a mistake which is destroying us but will in your far distant future destroy you."

"A mistake?" Wing's mind asked.

"Yes, those scientists of ours who labored so hard and long, built a machine not to warp space, as we all thought, but to warp time."

"You see, Space Commander Curt Wing, we, too, are men. We were fighting our past, you your future on Earth, our common home. In attacking your world, we have destroyed ourselves."

"But why?" Wing's mind started to ask.

"You saw us merely as shadows, did you not? That's all you were to us, too. Shadows; but very, very stubborn. Never in our recorded history had we met such a stubborn and such an able foe. No wonder. We were fighting against ourselves."

"It's time to go, Curt Wing, before the time door closes and locks you forever here."

Man to climb so far into the stars and to die by his own hand, Wing was thinking bitterly.

"Do not despair," the thought intruded. "What is done is done, and nothing can be changed."

"Wait," Wing cried out. "We beat you because a big, dumb guy by the name of

Dead Eye had the quiet faith that we could. He showed us the way.

"Dead Eye said," and the words came from his memory like a prayer, "don't worry, Cap. Shucks, they can't be tough enough to lick us. Earthmen always fight better when the going's rough. Why, we'll knock 'em dead."

"Take hope from Dead Eye's words. We were in the depths of despair when he uttered them, and we came up that long, terrible road to hope. We licked our problem. You, because you, too, are men, can lick yours."

There was nothing in the emotionless thought that answered him, that told they were heartened.

Curt Wing turned his back on Man's

future, walked down the silver hallway, through the hexagonal door to his own world. He stepped out in the quiet hush of the church.

He saw the two spacers still staring in as he walked out of the darkness of the church into the brightness of day.

One of the spacers called out:

"Commander, the light's fading!"

The shouted words echoed in his ears as he strode down the steps.

The light's fading . . . Like hell it was! Somehow those future men would find a way. Wasn't it man's way to thumb his nose at impossibilities and forge ahead?

Space Commander Curt Wing's shoulders straightened. He lengthened his stride. He did not look back.

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers and artists who help to nourish PLANET STORIES and the Vizigraph.

Let's just call this an on-the-spot profile of a guy who wants to write. . . .

The guy is Bryce Walton. And he travels. And he's apt to turn up in any part of the world, just so long as it's a place you've never heard of. What we mean is, he's a hard man to keep up with. Especially if you're an editor, and your crystal ball is broken, and you're trying to find him so you can tell him you're buying one of his stories.

For instance, it seemed like years after we dropped him a note of acceptance on his tale, *Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress*, that he finally wrote back:

"Because of various and disagreeable circumstances in which I have found myself during the past six months, I only recently was informed of your accepting my story. Belated though it was, this notice was greeted with the exuberance customarily associated with such notices. The letter reached me on the Okinawa beachhead."

See what we mean? This was almost a year after his story was bought.

"I would like again to say how much I appreciate your consideration of my efforts," he continued: "and I am very sorry for myself because I haven't been able to continue forwarding stories."

"Although my ambition has remained undimmed, environmental conditions prevent me

from sending you any more of the stories that are in my mind. Since your acceptance of *Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress* I have covered initial assault landings in Lingeyan Gulf, and on Iwo Jima, Okinawa, the Kerema Rettos, Ie Shima and Iheys Shima for LEATHERNECK MAGAZINE and for the Coast Guard. So you can readily understand my reasons for not being able to squeeze in even one yarn.

"However, I have plenty of ideas and outlines for the future when I again have time and surroundings for acceptable work—a time which, from here, doesn't look too distant.

"The fact that after having apparently hit the PLANET media I was immediately forced into circumstances discouraging to following through has been pretty hard for me to take. I realize, too, that this same situation has proven to be a headache to editors since the war.

"Although I don't want to infringe on your editorial time-table, I would really appreciate a note concerning scientification trends, and PLANET news, and, naturally, how my own material is shaping up. In return I promise to send you, direct, a communique from Tokyo Bay. Hoping to hear from you to relieve the hideous monotony of combat, I remain, Bryce Walton."

Some time later we received another letter from Bryce, further outlining his activities:

"I am here at Guam enroute back to the States and I would like to try to contact the scientification field again. I want to continue relations with your publications and would certainly appreciate a note on how I stand with you on the two stories you bought. Though I have been a freelance radio script writer for the past few years, those two yarns represent my first two sales in the field."

And now, just recently, Bryce dropped a note that told us he expected to stick around home ground for a while—long enough to write a few tales for PLANET STORIES, anyway.

Welcome home, buddy. We'll be looking forward to seeing more of your work.

C. W.



THE VIZIGRAPH

Hold your hats. Here we go. Off on another tour of the PLANET STORIES universe.

You've been crying for Leigh Brackett? Well, Brackett it is. Ray Bradbury? Bradbury it is. In other words, we've tried to give you what you want. Are we heading in the right direction? Only you can tell. React, guys and gals. React. Let us know what you think, what gripes you, what pleases you. This is your magazine, so blast away and let us know what you think.

You know the process. Write anything you like, so long as it is in good taste. Double-space your lines. Write on one side of the page. Two pages the limit.

Let's have an idea of what you think of our new cover artist, Chester Martin. Does he fit the bill?

Returning to the Vizigraph, if the following three winners will drop a card indicating their choices of originals from the Winter Issue, their pics will be forwarded immediately.

1: Arthur J. Bryant. 2: Grace Masher. 3: Robert A. Bradley. Okay. Enough said. Let's get down to business.

C. W.

BEWILDERED

924 Bowen St., N. W.
Atlanta, Ga.

DEAR EDITOR:

I've been sitting on the side lines and listening in on the Vizigraph for a long time without getting into any of the arguments. I'm bashful. However, now that I've worked up a little nerve I want to unload a few "Whys".

Why must we have the PLANET STORIES on a seasonal basis? If it snows, I rush out and buy a Spring issue. If the trees are budding, I rush out and get a Summer issue, etc. I don't get it. I'm dumb.

Why did you promise us everything in the Spring issue and then give us what you did? I'll admit you gave us everything but I'm still trying to figure out what "everything is" or what is "everything." You quit making promises.

Why, in the one story that was going somewhere did Fox let Guantra threaten Ilse with a plain ole antiquated pistol shooting lead bullets when everybody else was packing heat guns and what have you of that Super age? Why did he let mighty, backbreaking Kortha get childish and spit at Guantra? Hell, that ain't even polite down here.

Why can't we have some of the "Lensman" series? They are still tops.

Why can't we have more stories like *Man'th* in the Winter Issue? But for gosh sakes not too much of that hyper-space. I got so darned tangled up trying to figure it out that I crawled under the bed instead of in it.

Why did that ancient old crone Gerry Williams work out such an explanation or definition for BEM? Why did she-aw-skip it.

Why must all BEMS be green? Ask Guy Trucano if it is a biological factor or a Parkhurst fancy.

Why did I get started on this anyway? I'm bewildered.

Solong,

ROY TIMWELL.

ERA OF MIRACLES

DEAR SIRs:

I don't know exactly how to start my letter. I have never written to a mag. before although I have wanted to a great many times. My mother and father always thought I was sailing off course when I read your stories and since I came into the Navy I have found more than pleasure in them. I have found a field of thought that I was sure most people considered fantastic. I want to express my heart felt thanks for *What Hath Me?* in your spring issue. It is one of the best stories you have ever published. I take extreme care in reading all your stories dealing with the mind and its actions for the simple reason that I find the mind and its transactions of thoughts the most "fantastic" thing of all. Also a "fine" rating for *Electron Eat Electron*, it was not only a thrill-packed story, but also it placed a hope in my heart that in the future if there ever is another war I hope it can be fought in just such a manner. I can't begin to explain how your stories bring a feeling of living in another age and another world I have always thought in terms of the thousands of years to come and the millions of things to be invented. I am proud to be a part of a world that in my time I think will progress more toward "unbelievable" rocket ship travel than any other time. I hope I shall always be able to get your mag, because of its fine stories. I hope you don't mind my not using "sincerely" to close my letter but it never seemed to me that it carried a friendly feeling.

Your Friend,

CLYDE THOMPSON, JR.

(Ed. Note: Your thoughts, Mr. Thompson, greatly resemble mine. It has struck me many times that a new "bible" of miracles could be written about this age in which we live. Science, in today's world, is going far beyond those incidents a thousand or two thousand years back in Earth's history which we have come to look upon as wonders.)

CRITIC

520 Highland Ave.,
Ottawa, Ont., Canada

DEAR MR. WHITEHORN:

PLANET STORIES is the fourth stf mag in my line-up. Why not first? Well, for a number of reasons. Firstly, sad as it may seem, the Stories part of P.S. is not what it was in the past. PLANET was probably better a year or so ago than at any time in its history. Nevertheless, the stories are plenty good! Don't get me wrong. It's not the stories that account for it entirely. What then? Yes, you guessed it! The covers of P.S. have been consistently putrid for years and the covers have a powerful psychological effect on the enjoyment of the mag.

Almost more important than the covers are the interior illustrations. These have been getting steadily worse until in this ish there are only two half-decent pics!

So here is my considered and weighty advice. Take heed! Make Notes! 1. Try to bring the stories up again to the amazing standards you set a while back. Possibly this could be done by getting a hold of some old master writers like Leigh Brackett! 2. Consider fan opinion and get out some decent covers. Is it editorial policy to have these monotonous blurbs every issue or are the artists to blame? In either case I would like to see you follow one fan's advice and hearse and park Parkhurst. Try to have the cover illustrate a story and illustrate it accurately. 3. Spruce up the interior illustrations. More Anderson and some new—good—artists. 4. Try for absolute accuracy in illustrating. If at all possible, never let an artist illustrate a story he hasn't read and insist that he make his illustrations check with the yarn. 5. How 'bout some more editorial comment in The Vizigraph. It enhances interest and helps us fen to get acquainted with you.

I hope you won't regard all the above as sheer egotism. It is really a sincere effort to improve your mag which I enjoy immensely.

Only space now for a quick rating of the ish.

1. *The Blue Venus* . . . Emmet McDowell is fast becoming one of my favorite authors and in my opinion *The Blue Venus* is his best so far.

2. *Crisis on Titan* . . . Straight, clean-cut action; clever, real humor; swell description of alien life and a reasonably worked out plot make this great stf story Adam's best story to date.

3. *What Hath Me?* . . . Kuttner—ahhhh. The old maestro bangs out as smooth a story as is to be found and this is no exception.

4. *Engines of the Gods* . . . Maybe I was a little unfair with this one because I couldn't help but compare it with Fox's classic *The Last Monster*. It really was a magnificent story (the *Engines*, that is).

5. *Defense Mech* . . . No one but Bradbury could have turned out this! It is the neatest and almost the only thing of its kind I have read.

6. *Electron Eat Electron* . . . Not bad, but I didn't agree with you on its practicality. Wars will always be ugly. They will never develop into that "just for fun" stuff. They will always engulf the whole Terrestrial population—until they are stopped for reasons of self-preservation because of that strictly-from-science-fiction gadget—the atomic bomb.

7. *Survival* . . . Still not bad, but then I didn't like *Steel Giants of Chaos* either.

Feature Flash was its usual good self and The Ringers were a scream as usual. In The Viz Joke gets the No. 1 spot (natch!), Happy Genius Lesser No. 2 and new fan Mildred A. Ward No. 3. (She had the only decent review of the mag that was published.)

Hoping I'll be forgiven for all my gripes, I remain—(Ah yes, that I do!)

Yours Sincerely,

R. R. ANGER.

DESCRIBIN' KID

Forest Hills, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Since the birth of PLANET, I have been a constant reader. I've found great enjoyment in the stories you publish. They're a wonderful escape from the every day, hum-drum life that social laws, political laws and keep off the grass signs force us to lead.

It has never occurred to me to write a letter to the VIZIGRAPH as in doing so I would be

offering my name for publication beside those of a mass of stupid morons.

Just this once, however, I'd like to have my say:

You whose names appear in this column are stupid and bloated with your own importance. You speak—and no doubt feel—as though you were gods. "I don't like this. I don't like that." You blow off about crack-pot theories on science, art, writing—subjects you know less than nothing about. You insult people left and right.

You, in my opinion, are less than cattle. You are the masses, the sheep who go to make up this world. You walk the streets with your heads empty of all else but sleep eat and love; your lantern jaws slack, betraying your lack of intelligence; your eyes vacant, entirely without the spark and love of life; your shoulders round; your bodies stooped and lax; your moronic minds empty of worthwhile thought.

In short—and I have just given a wonderful description of you—you are contributors to the VIZIGRAPH.

Cordially and sincerely,

PHIL WARNER.

P.S. That goes for the editor, too.
(Ed. Note: Glad he didn't forget us.)

REPULSIVE

1450 East 19th Street
Brooklyn 30, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Wal, wal. What have we here in the way of good stories? First I will take *Engines of the Gods*. No, on second thought, you take it. What a dud, to put it mildly. I most certainly would not like to be a friend of "Kortha." After shaking hands with him all a person's hand would be good for would be to clean out clogged drain pipes. That pic on page 3. Ha, ha. You would think that the guy had a pair of nylons hidden away from them. Really, I think some of the drawings for the advertisements are nicer than some of the drawings for the stories.

Look at the one on page 51. That's it. Did you look? Okay, stop screaming. Stop screaming I tell you! That's it. Now back into your cage. Personally, I believe that people have the right to be ugly, but she abused the privilege. What, a face? I mean, what a face! I have seen better on B.E.M.'s. Speaking of B.E.M.'s, PLANET has the distinction of having the most repulsive, sickening, nauseating one I have ever seen. It was in *Meteor Men of Mars* in the Winter '42-3 ish.

The cover is very nice. Very nice indeed! Nice blue sky, among other things. Maybe I am happy. Why shouldn't I be? I have just finished *Vassals of the Master World*. What a story! The greatest I have ever read in PLANET STORIES.

What Ho! Me! The best in the ish, natch! *The Blue Venus*. Not bad for a pure adventure story. It was interesting though. *Electron Eat Electron*. The nicest thing about it was the name. *Defense Mech*. Cute.

Before this typewriter slips I must sign off.

Sincerely,

HOWARD GABRIEL.

FANZINITE

Co. C 5th Trng. Bn. BTS
ASFTC Fort Lewis, Wash.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am new to your magazine, PLANET STORIES; but I have been reading science-fiction for years.

I have just finished reading the Spring issue, and it strikes me as a good magazine.

I, as all writers to you usually do, will give my opinions of the stories. The best to the worst as follows.

1. *Defense Mech*, Ray Bradbury. First because it is differently written and it captured my imagination more than the others.

2. *Electron Eat Electron*, Noel Loomis. This should have been titled "Leaders' Wor."

3. *Survival*, Basil Wells.

4. *The Blue Venus*, Emmett McDowell, rates even with

5. *Engines of the Gods*, Gardner F. Fox.

6. *Crisis on Titan*, James R. Adams, a conventional title and plot.

The cover, humph, humph, illustrates what story? It might be *Survival*, but then everyone would be a BEM (or a Frog). Speaking of illustrations, Hollingsworth's were the worst. They look like a child's attempt at linoleum block cuttings.

Now about myself. I am a member in absentia of LASFS. Being in the army limits my fanactivities, but I keep up on reading and writing to the various mags.

I have in mind to produce a fan directory which will include the names, addresses, and the mags read of as many fans as possible. It will, if possible, be published annually with quarterly supplements. The price is not set, but it will be at cost or lower. Prozone editors will probably supplied a copy each free.

(Pvt.) KENNETH H. BONNELL

MASTERFUL EFFORT

177 West St.
Closter, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

Have never written to a science-fiction mag, so have a hearty cluckle at this, my first, (and only, you hope), masterful effort.

But maybe I just have an inferiority complex, or sumpin', so I'll finish the business right quick. The Believe It or Not Dept. Believe It or Not the Spring '46 issue was the first science-fiction mag of any description I have ever read. Where have I been? That's what I asked myself after I had finished my first sf story, *Electron Eat Electron*. I picked this at random from among the rest. I was just a little surprised to find some of the others even better than this one.

I'll not give the stories any 1, 2, 3, rating; just mention the ones I liked and disliked. In order as they appear in the book: *Engines of the Gods* I didn't on account it was too long. I like to finish a story at one sitting, and I can't sit too long. (Not due to any physical reasons, you understand.) Well's story, *Survival*, was good. *Defense Mech*, in plain Gutter English, stunk, although Doolin's *Illu* was good. *What Ho! Me* wasn't bad, but Hollingsworth's picture was a little confused. As I mentioned, *Electron Eat Electron* was good, and the pic by Martin was very good. *Crisis on Titan* was good, but I guessed the ending correctly. The Ringers were good. *The Blue Venus* was too long to read. Might be I'm missing something by skipping some of the longies, but I got more than my money's worth out of just the other stories.

Without any reservations, I can say this, The Vizigraph is the best readers voice section on any planet.

Now I'll close, saying that I think PLANET STORIES is a swell mag. Don't let anyone kid you, kid, P.S. really is "PEERFECT"!

Sincerely,

RAYMOND SHORT.

P.S. Please excuse any errors in my typing, as I use the "Bible System," "seek and ye shall find." That's a joke, son, a joke, that is.

WHIRL WITH MERRY MERLE

602 South 10 Avenue
Yakima, Washington

DEAR EDITOR:

In the latest issue of PLANET STORIES, as I was starting to read *Electron Eat Electron*, you asked a question of whether this story answers "How will future wars be fought? Will civilization be destroyed?" My answer to that is, no. It is, as you say, an in-a-class-by-itself story. Also, why don't you make the illustrations fit the story? At this electron control panel, in the story, a sixteen year old boy is supposed to be operating it, yet in the picture, the person sitting in front of the panel looks like a man instead of a boy!

What Hath Me?, *Survival*, and *Crisis on Titan* are all fair stories, BUT *Defense Mech* was terrible. Can't you get a more corny story? It didn't even make sense, and please tell the author to try again. *Blue Venus* was an excellent story. Why don't you have more of the same type used? *Engines of the Gods* was another excellent story and the author should be congratulated on a wonderful success.

Sincerely yours,

MERLE LAMSON.

DANGEROUS PRACTICE

4711 Verdun Ave.
Verdun, Quebec

DEAR EDITOR:

Well here we are again, and a nice juicy lot of pickings we have, too. First of all, let's attack writers in the Vizigraph, a dangerous practice as I remember.

I wonder why B. Littleton is so certain that space outside the earth's atmosphere is a perfect vacuum? I understand that is only a theory, so one man's guess is as good as another's. So I for one will go on using rockets. I'd hate to get stuck between here and Mars without even an old copy of PLANET STORIES to pass the time!

And Mr., I presume it's "Mr.," Wranek believes we should have one common geography for each planet. Yet directly above he states he dislikes present stories because they've lost the originality of "John Carter on Mars," in fact because, "they're all alike." Mr. Wranek—you're confused! You answer your own question, the stories would probably become intolerably dull.

I really liked Joe Kennedy's letter. But how can anyone manage to cram so much into two pages? Someone's cheating somewhere! I'd like to quote Joe on one point "I kinda miss the old days," he says, "when yarns with a radically new twist weren't frowned upon." Frowned upon? Seems ye editor should point out that a new policy is in the making. Stories now are turned away because they lack originality and that "radically new twist." I can show you just such a rejection Joe, drop around anytime.

I agree with the bi-monthly biz. I get sore everytime at having to wait three whole months for the next issue. It's just too darn long! How about it fans?

Thanks for the hint Milt, about the peppermints ye editor loves. I may be able to find a use for that knowledge.

Did Basil Wells read the *Blue Venus*? I won't say it was even "the least bit sexy," to quote again, but mmmmm—I leave it up to Basil!

Well, well, I haven't even started to rate stories and look at all the space left. This cold Canadian weather must have shrunk my typewriter keys, could be!

Mr. Whitehorn may I be permitted to state that you pass very odd descriptions? In *Blue Venus*, page 92, "He was wearing only coat and trousers. The brown tangle of hair on his chest extended in a thin line down his flat belly." That is slightly confusing! Did he have low hips, a high belly, or transparent pants. I've looked at myself and even without the hair I can't see how it's done. Nasty aren't I?

Stories are sort of hard to classify this time, but here goes:

1. *The Blue Venus*. I picked this one because the ending sort of caught me off guard. But I noticed what I believe was one glaring flaw. At the beginning the *Blue Venus* acted with all the cunning and scheming power of an adult, and not until the ending did she act her age. Maybe I'm just too critical.

2. *Engines of the Gods*. I liked this one because the hero was different. There was a lot of science used that certainly would have stumped me and the ending was perfect.

3. *Defense Mech*. I simply liked this because it was different. Sais-tous!

4. *Crisis on Titan*. It wasn't anything to get excited about but I liked it.

5. *Survival*. Well, so Basil writes stories as well as reading them. Good story, but a little run of the mill plot.

Well, that's as far as I'll go this issue until I get a new stock of adjectives; I had very few to start with. By the way Parkhurst, believe it or not, your covers are improving. Before they were perfect except for a certain something missing in the girl. I don't know what was missing, but this issue she found it. Super swell!

The Ringers as usual were swell. It took me a while to get the fact that "Pa" was actually inside the monster. That animal was sure transparent!

And that's that until next time.

Sincerely, (dull ending, what?)

GERRY WILLIAMS.

MADCAP MARVIN

6751 Kindred Street
Philadelphia 24, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is the first time I have gathered enough courage to take my trusty typewriter in hand. The reason for this amateurish missive can be found in your Spring issue, pages 70 to 78. In case you're a little hazy, I'll clarify things. The story I have in mind is *Electron Eat Electron* by Noel Loomis. In my opinion this short attained the highest and most distant pinnacle that any story, sci-fiction or otherwise, may reach. It was a new idea, a "scoop," a "class-by-itself" tale. (Quotations thanks to ye Ed.)

To be concise: It had no childish love slant, no trashy plot, and no more words than necessary to give it maximum effectiveness. It was a REALLY

good yarn, one of the best I've had the pleasure of reading in a long, lo-o-o-ng time.

Now for the rest of the stories. In my enthusiasm I nearly overlooked another swell tale. *What Hath Me* by Kuttner, although it had a terrible title, was truly good enough to grace PLANET's pages. (I expect a thank-you-note for the above sentence.) Neat, nicely written, and fast-moving. As one of your vizifans so aptly remarked: Keep Kuttner Koming.

Engines of the Gods by Fox was very entertaining and might have been first if it weren't for the excellence of the other two yarns. This Fox fellow is somebody I'd hang onto; he looks promising.

The rest of the stories in your line-up aren't worth mentioning. No comment on the illustrations. I'm one of the very, very few who thinks that artwork could be omitted to make more room for the stories.

Ah, yes. I almost forgot to rate the letters. I feel that a letter is worth exactly the sincerity that the author puts into it. For this reason I award the coveted first place to each and every vizifan, undoubtedly an unprecedented happening. (That was a mouthful, wasn't it?) I do this rash act because I think that all of the letters are more or less sincere, despite a few harmless, and oftentimes humorous, shenanigans.

And now adios, for the simple reason I haven't anything more to say.

Yours,

MARTIN WALLACE.

BLEEP!

134 Second Street
Fort Myers, Florida

DEAR EDITOR:

Firstly, you don't have to print this letter . . . if you don't want to. I'm not going to say anything that hasn't been said before.

I'd like to review the VIZIGRAPH. You find more character in this reader's department than in any pulp-length novel ever written.

Thanks, Mr. Bryant, you at least had something to say.

In response to Marvin Maxwell: to your logical light problem . . . Nuts. Can't you add the "faster-than-light" theory to the following list of "impossibles": The horseless carriage, heavier-than-air flight, radar, super-sonic airplanes, transmutation, man-carrying rockets, atomic power, and even a round Earth? Two more "impossibles" I expect to live to see are the first interplanetary rocket and the four minute mile.

Robert Bradley is no screwball, even if he does think so.

To Miss Masher, the average science-fiction fan is not scientific. On the contrary he probably doesn't know the composition of his own fingernail. (I don't.) Else why those beautiful covers?

Good idea, Mr. Wranek. (Hint, dear Editor, Hint.)

Incidentally, Joe K., take some bicarbonate of soda before you read this issue.

My first place letter vote for Milt Lesser.

We readers have just one thing against BEM's, Mr. Trucano; they sometimes get in front of the heroine. (By the way, Mr. Whitehorn, thank the last Spring-cover monster on the right for me, will you?)

Just to fill space here's an entirely useless list of personal story likes since Volume 2, No. 1:

1. *The Diversifal*—Rocklyne.
2. *Red Witch of Mercury*—McDowell.

3. *What Hath Me?*—Kuttner.

4. *The Last Monster*—Fox.

5. *Jewel of Bas*—Brackett.

6. *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep*—DePina.

7. *Joe Carson's Weapon*—Adams.

8. *Mr. Meek Plays Polo*—Simak.

9. *Mutiny in the Void*—Tanner.

10. *Thralls of the Endless Night*—Brackett.

You can see I don't have Volume 1 of PLANET. Maybe some of you nice people can remedy that. Huh, people, huh?

Thanks for a wonderful magazine.

Yours very truly,

ROBERT MELVILLE, MM 1/c.

P.S. In case you're wondering what the MM stands for, it means Masterful Moron. Bleep, bleep.

SCADS AND SCADS OF UNCLADS

76 Andrews St.
Lowell, Mass.

DEAR EDITOR:

I've stood it as long as I can. I'm ready to blow a fuse. I don't want to write this letter but I have to.

For months, yea years, I have had to watch a wonderful department ruined. Do you know what department I mean? Yes! You guessed it, the Vizigraph. It has been and is still being ruined by a bunch of self-styled scientist and art and literary critics. My friendly little morons know as much about these subjects as I do about Caesar's great-grandmother. So with your permission dear Editor, I ask these ignoramus to please shut up for their own sake and the sake of the readers.

And now for some of these self righteous hypocrites who are embarrassed by the cover of a rag when said cover has the printed form of a beautiful if scantily clad girl on its surface. If these people (?) shock so easily they are altogether too young or too meek to read stf at all. They are the type of persons that will walk on a crowded boardwalk with some one dear to them, dressed in an abbreviated costume and exposing a great expanse of anatomy to the general public, thinking it very stylish.

The real big laugh comes when you find out that the women and girls are not the ones that get-ah-embarrassed when purchasing such a book. It is the supposed he-men that suffer from this experience.

I'm sticking my neck out saying this, but every word is true, Lord help us.

All I can offer is to say, keep up the good work. I have enjoyed your mag for quite some time and hope to do so in the future.

With a challenge to those bashful Billys and Betties I now sign off.

Sincerely yours,

ERNEST ROGERS.

PURPLE PRINCE OF PLUTO

1311-25th St.
Galveston, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

The world's quarterly foreteller of a quiet, peaceful, intelligent future for all of us suffering mortals finally reared its violent head at the newsstand, where it was promptly trapped and devoured by your spasmodic correspondent. Very tasty, too, I might add.

Before plunging recklessly into the gaping maw of the Spring PS, I'd like to add my bit to the tumult raging in La Vizi. Is science-fiction literature? Has there ever been a story of that type that could be classed as literature? Well, before the proverbial second thought, I'm tempted to offer an emphatic yes to both questions. But caution rules. Literature? I think there must have been some stories worthy of that distinction. Where, I don't know. Certainly not the early works of H. G. Wells, however interesting they might have been. I'm inclined to think that I've read hundreds of better stories than Wells' in various magazines. What is needed here, in my humble opinion, is an authoritative, clear, concise definition of just what makes a story fall into that vague realm called literature. Even with such a guide, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. But that would be considerably better than looking for a needle while unable to identify it if you did happen across it.

Leave us now examine the contents of the Spring ish—taking the yarns as we come to them. I tried my level best to enjoy Fox's *Engines of the Gods*, and occasionally succeeded, but I'm afraid that it was something of a letdown after his other tales. But, undeniably, Mr. Fox shows more promise than anybody to come along in some time. Let him have his head and we're liable to get somewhere.

(Ed. Note: Mr. Fox does all right without his head—so we're keeping it for our trophy room.)

Basil Wells' *Survival* was okay if you like that sort of thing, but it seemed a trifle unenthused. *Defense Mech*, by Ray Bradbury, was the best story in the exalted Volume III, No. 2, of PLANET STORIES. Really fine. Getting back to our literature discussion momentarily, it seems to me that Bradbury would qualify as well as anybody.

Henry Kuttner turned in his usual sterling performance with *What Hath Me?* Of the many memorable sfantasy stories I've read, Mr. Kuttner has written more than his share—and he keeps improving steadily; no mean accomplishment. I enjoyed Noel Loomis' *Electron Eat Electron*, and *Crisis on Titan*, by James R. Adams. The former was thought-provoking, and the latter had spots of clever writing that made up for a rather debatable plot. Neither was outstanding, but they are certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

The Blue Venus, by Emmett McDowell, was a good enough adventure yarn. It seemed a trifle lurid, but then I haven't quite reached the age of eighty yet, so . . . hmmm. I just hope Mr. McDowell doesn't run out of colors. What comes next—*The Purple Prince of Pluto*?

Summing up, a very nice issue, Mr Editor. The cover was more subdued than usual, and interesting in its own crude way. Murphy ran away with all the honors on the interior pix. Guy Gifford must work hard on those involved drawings, so I won't comment.

La Vizi is still way ahead of other letter departments. Sure was swell to see Milt Lesser back home again—give the man first place! Joe Kennedy gets the nod for the number two slot, and number three goes to Millard Grimes, Ye Editor, and the spleen.

One last blast—if no story has yet been written in the science-fiction genre that can be classed as literature, one certainly will be forthcoming. The opportunities are staggering. Upon which

thought, my faithful Remington is once more stilled—however, momentarily.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER.

(Editor's Note: Is science-fiction literature? Can it ever be called that? Frankly, I don't know. But I do know this. I've read Shakespeare—without liking it. And that is literature. I've read and written and enjoyed Stf. And I've seen things in print—under the heading STF—which came to pass. And I believe a good number more "fictional ideas" will be coming true in the near future. Is that a usual product of hacked-out words? Or is it the result of thought-filled writing?

What is literature in America today? It seems we are still turning to the past to find that. Can it be that the forest that surrounds us today is so thick we cannot see the trees? Can it be that we've become so commercial-minded in presenting stories and reading them that we can't see their true worth?

Well, perhaps, when science-"fiction" of today becomes fact tomorrow, people will look back and recognize its actual value. Events of the world, I believe, will answer the question: Is science-fiction literature?)

GORY SLAUGHTER

215 E. Southern Ave.
Covington, Ky.

DEAR EDITOR:

Science and fantasy and adventure.

Because we would increase our scientific knowledge we encourage ourselves to dream fantastic nonsense in search of new methods and ideas, aided and abetted by the spirit of adventure which leads us into strangely familiar surroundings.

Your magazine has encouraged the writing and reading of scientification where adventure abounds. Now that you have laid the foundation, why not erect that building for which it is best fitted?

Science has just won a great war. Fantasy and adventure are still fighting that war. What hopes have our sciences of winning the peace while their powerful brothers continue wallowing in the fields of combat? Every prophetic nerve within me cries out that this condition spells another great war—AND SOON.

How can we establish a peace upon earth when every story we read rings out with the clash of battles and gory slaughters? Should we not take stock of our own inner selves and vanquish this desire for bloodshed, even in it's fictional garb? If we think war, we are going to plan war. Unconsciously.

What else is there to write about? God help that nation that has degenerated to the point where it can no longer find place in it's imagination for anything but struggle and strife. It would be an act of Providence to wipe them out in their ignorance.

Imagine, if you can, a country wherein strife does not dwell. A country wherein the citizens have grown so peaceful that they dismiss their police forces and repeal all their laws. You can't imagine it? I was quite sure you wouldn't be able to!

But, you say, everybody is working toward a time when there will be peace and harmony throughout the civilized world, and that they cannot lay down their arms until conditions improve. I concede that point without argument.

But what about our fiction? What about our daily conversations? What about our internal problems? Do we not find enough scientific

problems confronting us to make room for fantasy and adventure in a new form?

There is a rather ancient parable to the effect that the people who must have blood will be given the opportunity of tasting their own blood.

The finger of prophecy points to this present generation of peoples and nations.

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY.

(Ed. Note: Take that, you heathen dogs! Go ahead and die! Die! Die! Die! Lie in the gutter and rot! Bleed out the vile rottenness in you! Stink, as the flesh drops from your bones in gory patches and the maggots feast on your eyeballs!)

JUNIOR SAYS—

2701 Lenox Rd.
Atlanta, Ga.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is the first time I've tried this, so here goes. That COVER! The gal looks like she's flying through the air with the greatest of ease. Them there BEM'S!! How would you like to meet up with one of them some dark night? Brrrr!!

Well here are the stories. Some I liked and some I, WELL!?

1. *The Blue Venus*—Emmett McDowell did fairly well on that one, but that was some bird.
2. *Electron Eat Electron*—Darn good.
3. *Engines of the Gods*—That guy KORTHA would make a swell prize fighter.

The rest were just so-so, but the worst one of all was *Survival*. That story was awful, and I do mean BAD.

There is only one thing wrong with P. S., it doesn't come out often enough. Well now I shall say—goodbye?

Sincerely,

HUME McFARLAND, JR.

THOSE COVERS—WOW!

577 Northridge Rd.
San Francisco 24, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, here it is at last. My letter to my favorite mag. I've been reading P. S. for nigh onto two years and enjoyed every issue. Yessir, you've got the most colossal, stupendous, magnificent mag. out. (You can send me the check by return mail.) Now to business.

The Spring issue's best stories were *Engines of the Gods*, another great one by Fox. Give us more of his work! And *The Blue Venus*, a good story with a great ending. The rest follow in order:

3. *What Hath Me*—a little hard to swallow but still good.
4. *Electron Eat Electron*—someone should set Loomis up as a fortune teller, he'd make millions.
5. *Survival*—fair, only where did I hear of that ego transporter before. Wasn't it in a story called *The Steel Giants of Chaos* or some such?
6. *Crisis on Titan*—not so good.
7. *Defense Mech*—I'll say no more.

The Visigraph is good. Could stand expansion. And the Cover—Wow! Don't your artists ever read the stories? By the way, what story was the scene from?

Well, enough for now.

Your new Visi-fan,

BOB LUEHR, JR.

SYSTEM KILLER

208½ South Michigan St.
South Bend 11, Indiana

Hi EDITOR:

You are now gazing upon the first of a long line of letters that will be thrown at you after every issue from one of your new admiring fans. I own only three issues of *PLANET* and I can vouch for most of what I find except the lousy covers. I join with the other Visifans in clamoring for a cover with a big atom ship splattered right in the center. No BEMS please. The first time I saw this mag was three years ago and it had a good cover then. But, either Parkhurst knocked off the other guy to get his job or the other fellow got lost between Saturn and Jupiter, I don't know. There's no time like the present to have a change for the better. The system of the three Gs, a guy, a gal and a goon, doesn't hold water in the other sf mags and it shouldn't hold any water in *PLANET*. Your mag otherwise is on the OK and as far as I'm concerned it's well worth the price of admission. I look with expectance and anxiety toward the next ish. It may decide whether I mail in my six bits and change for a year's subscription.

As I was leafing through the Visigraph I espied the letter from a fellow moron. It was Bill Groover's. (Let's shake tee hup Bill?) I wonder how he got such a terrible typewriter? Mine has been locked up since it passed its days of being useful in 1900. At any rate, Groover's in the groove. Here's another letter. It's from my old friend Joeyboy Kennedy of Startling Stories and Thrilling Wonder Stories. He follows me everywhere, or vise-versa.

I agree when readers say that all letters should be answered even if they can't be published (for instance, mine). ((don't believe a word of that bracketed statement!))

Now to the current issue! In first place—a tie: *What Hath Me* by Henry Kuttner and *Survival* by Basil Wells. *WHM* sounds like one of my wildest dreams. There is the hero, completely massacred and on the brink of death. He has sacrificed everything to get for himself . . . nothing. He pleads for life and the small matter of a beautiful girl and wins out. Aaahh, ecstasy! *Survival* held me like a magnet, a truly great story.

Defense Mech takes second. What a laugh at the end. I read it three times.

Crisis on Titan. Now who can I associate with a Barbers Delight? This story was third, but I don't know why.

Fourth—*Electron Eat Electron*. This sounded like a brawl in a restaurant. In fifth place comes *The Blue Venus*. The only reason I understood it was because I just finished *Heredity* in my Biology.

Engines of the Gods. Pretty good but I don't see why both novels come at the bottom of the list.

All in all this was a neat issue, even the cover improved! (Only slightly, of course.)

Yours truly,

HARLEY SACHS.

GUY WITH AN IDEA

2962 Santa Ana St.
South Gate, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Let me say from the first that I never thought that a new editor could so change a mag. Mr.

Ex-Editor was a good man, but you seem to be trying harder, or something. Anyway the Spring Issue is the best out in over a year to my way of thinking.

Your two lead novels were up to the old standards, but the novel *What Hath Me?* was excellent. I would really like to see it worked out a little better tho, for as it was it seemed Knuttner was trying to cut a long story down to fit. The part where the hero was tortured by the fears of his past was a very neat touch. Nothing is so frightful as the fears of youth.

The other outstanding story is *Electron Eat Electron*. As a story it is fair, but its ideas are what make it stand out. With but a few changes I o think that the future war well be like this. But there will not one man at the controls, for such men as Loomis picture will not come soon. Maybe a man to a ship. And they will not wait till the other country is ready. They will have to be ready, or else! No doubt each ship would automatically send back radar pictures of the land it is passing over. Thus the man guiding the ship can hit any target they wish. The remote control tanks is another good idea, and as the men see only through a small slit, it would be easy enough to put a radar beam in the plane of men. So few stories in PLANET lean so far toward the science side of the scale, it is a swell change. More Pleazzzzzz.

You seem to be looking around for new artist. (A couple new name in the last issues line up anyway.) Great. Neaver have under-stude why stf artice are so-so- (that's all, just "so-so.") Well I hope you fine some. But please not another Leydenfroost.

And to the Viz, Well what do you know, they are talking about science. You would all most think you were in the wrong mag. In trueth, a new age is braking. Who knows what will come next. Maybe even a science cover. (A gastly thought indeed.)

My votes go to Bryant (1st.), Berfield (2ed.), and because I like him Joke Kennedy (3rd.).

It is also interesting to note the number of old time Vizer back.

Say, why doesn't PLANET start a club like others have done. Only leting the members do the work. It could be a correspondence club. With the members writing to each other and talking over fandom and PLANET stories. And after each issue we could take a poll of members and then send a report. (This way the member wouldn't have to waste time in their letters listing the stories.) The club might use Mason's idea of a "PLANET supplement," seeing he isn't going to use it, I might try it if no one else will. Tho I don't have much to work with. Anyone interested in the idea, is welcome to write me. Will try and answer all letters. And then send a report to PLANET next time telling you what has been done.

Well hears hoping the next issue is even better.

Your's Fenly,

RICK SNEARY,
"The Hermit of the Gate."

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Will be interested in hearing how much fan reaction you get to this letter. If PLANET can be the hub of a circle of fan clubs, we'll be mighty pleased. Perhaps all the members can learn to write in the new language your letter indicates you have invented. But seriously, Rick, we think you have a swell idea. Loads of luck with it.)

LONELY LITTLE LAD

670 George St.
Clyde, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Shifting my ancient Oliver 5 into high gear (they have one, you know), I will now diagnose the Spring issue of good old Zippy PLANET STORIES.

1. *The Blue Venus* by McDowell. Had everything. Action, suspense, love interest. Very good. More McDowell.

2. *Defense Mech* by Bradbury. All I can say is very unusual, and very good.

3. *What Hath Me?* by Kuttner. Excellent. A return to the good old off-trail Planetale.

4. *Engines of the Gods* by Fox. An old plot, but well handled. *ManNth* was better. Good, just the same.

5. *Survival* by Wells. Good. Would have been a swell novel. Just too darn short.

6. *Electron Eat Electron* by Loomis. What are you bragging about? Just fair.

7. *Crisis on Titan* by Adams. So-so. Quite a let down from his other swell stories.

THE COVER! Good painting! Did it illustrate one of the "novels?" No! Did it illustrate the novelet? No! It illustrated a short story. And not very accurately, either. Anyone who read the story would know. And a bunch of BEM's too!

Inside Pics. Petridzo was best, then Martin, Murphy, Doolin, Kiemle. Hollingworth's white-on-black was terrible. My opinion, of course. By the way, what in 'ell is "thrallmery?"

Letters. First, Guy Trucano, Jr. I don't mind BEM's either. Just where would PLANET be without scads and scads of BEM's, I ask ya? Second, Gloria Erickson for her cover suggestions. If I were the Editor, don't laugh, I would force that is, every artist to read his story assignment! Oh well, the city is full of artists. You could find one who can read. (See address above.)

Walter A. Cosley, third, because of his worthwhile suggestions in his last two paragraphs. Al Weinstein almost got in there except for his liking *The Diversifal*. I didn't.

I have got a swell idea! Why don't all fans write up their idea of a S-F story and send it in to PLANET? (Don't shoot me with that ray-gun, Mr. Whitehorn! Don't! Don't! Ahhhh! Heh heh, fooled ya. Ray-proof vest!) Then all you'd have to do is slip in a rejection slip and send it back. That way, all these know-alls would begin to appreciate good stories.

Why don't you give away Gifford's originals, too? Now, I've got a bare space between two pin-ups that's just crying to be covered. (Hint, hint.)

Read Dunkelberger's Feature Flash. How do you get in that National Fantasy Fan Federation? It ain't no fun enjoying anything by yourself. I'd like to talk to people with the same interest in S-F as myself. I don't know anybody else who reads PLANET, or any other S-F mag. Hear my plea, please! Boo hoo! I'm so lo-onely! (Ain't I pitiful, tho?)

I forgot what I wrote in my last letter. Hope I'm not repeating myself.

Well, I better hang up now. (Don't take me literally.) I leave you with a plea for a bi-monthly PLANET.

Sincerely,

THOMAS JEWETT.

(Ed. Note: Walter Dunkelberger's address is 4443 Fourth Avenue, South; Fargo, North Dakota. Take it from there.)

THE LAST MONSTER

DEAR EDITOR:

I have been reading stf for the last five or six years and this is my first letter to any magazine, so please bear with me.

My sole purpose was to compliment you on the quality and variety of your Spring Issue of *PLANET STORIES*. It is by far the best complete issue of any magazine that I have ever read.

I can't decide which story I liked best. *What Hath Me?* was fine, but so was *The Blue Venus* and then what about *Engines of the Gods?* or *Survival*, but I can't forget *Electron Eat Electron* either. OH, its no use! They were all SWELL! My hats off to you. Please keep up the good work.

In your previous issues I especially liked *The Last Monster*, it being one of the finest stories published in some time. *ManNth* and *The Diverstif* were also good.

My only gripe is the covers. Why, of why, doesn't the artist either read the stories or else forget about it and stick to space ships or something. Well, I'm getting off the subject so I'd better sign off for now.

Sincerely,

M. HATFIELD.

(Ed. Note: We adore you, too, M. Hatfield.)

VIZIFIEND

400 Ontario Street
Wheeling, W. Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

DEAR OPERATOR:

Huba huba huba! Awk! Awk! So much for the cover. No, wait! As I live and strive to breathe, a female monstair of the FEM variety. What shade lipstick is she using, Ed?

Hate to seem a Vizifiend, but I just couldn't resist this chance to give our editor a much deserved pat on the back. An improved *PLANET*? Brother, you ain't just ventin' yo' spleen! (Thank you M.G.) Maybe part of my enthuse is due to my last letter being pubed, but the stories are better than usual, and the pics on pages 3, 9, 51, 71, 86 and 89 are fine. Doolin is doolin' and I don't think Hollingsworth much in this Ish. Taint the art it's the subjects. I got a kick out of *Defense Mech*. *Survival* didn't seem to end quite right. Did B.W. get tired typing or did he det his finis tut off.

All out for the "Physicsgraph." Bryant. I follow about half way through. Then I can get more out of starting where I flub up and reading backward to the start. This, I suppose, is because I do not know what the Mickelson-Morely method is.

Oberfield. Said "when sent up the stream—" Should have been "down." Look at that last paragraph! Instead of a-n-e-t's, someone put a-n-t's in my "Planets." Or is your trype setter such a flashy dresser that he knocks people's "e's" out?

Coslet. Are you telling, Sherlock, or asking? Groover. Do yu lick all the Covers, bill? I wondered what maid thim look so washed out?

Littleton. No powerless space flights. Advice: 'Sit under an apple tree till next fall. If you re-

main long enough I am sure the reason will, shall we say, strike you?

Masner. One vote for Grayce. (I want to prove that I'm a *Liberal Democrat*.)

Jacobowitz. Couldn't we try DDT on those BEM's?

Collison. Your 20 and free. I'm 24 and my father'll pay 'er for taking me.

Kennedy. Nice burp. Haven't been paling around with Groover, have you, Joe?

Lesser. Those peppermints aid digestion. No doubt the digestability of a yarn is determined by the number of mints required. In that case, guess I better sine off before I bankrupt the peppermint. When I started writing I was sure I had something to say but seem to have forgotten. Oh, wheel, let it go till next time.

All right, mister, I'm coming with you. I know you don't want to hurt me, you'r nice and white, white, white all over. No don't put that thing on me again! I can't move with it on. Let me say good bye to these nice people. G'bye nice people!

Finally,

* BILL OBERFIELD.

(Ed. Note: Still using the same trype-Wryter, Bill?)

POOR SHERLOCK

Box 682

Jamestown, North Dakota

DEAR EDITOR:

Re:—The Spring issue of "PLANET STORIES."

It seems that the disagreement between Mr. Sigler and myself has attracted considerable comment in the Viz. What started as a discussion of one idea, velocity, now appears to include several allied subjects. This was probably inevitable, considering the many contributing factors involved with and implied by the term velocity. Also, I notice that the majority of the writers are inclined to favor Mr. Sigler's ideas on the matter. Perhaps this, too, is natural, considering everything. In fact, when I first viewed the conglomeration of words that appeared over my sine in the Winter ish, my reaction was, "Great Rings of Saturn—do I know what I'm talking about?" Let's skip that for now—

Now to the matter in hand. By the way, Ed., I wonder what would happen if you were to take all the ideas advanced and combine them into one grandiose theory? I think (??) it would make Relativity and Atomic Physics appear as a legend from the forgotten past.

On to the Physics Class. This is one of those times when a Degree in Physics would come in handy. It might at least make me believe that I know what I'm talking about.

First off, let's consider the question raised by one writer—that concerning sound waves and the supersonics. Aren't sound waves simply a wave motion through a material medium such as the air? And the supersonics are the same, except that the higher frequencies involved are beyond the range of audibility. The speed of both sound and the supersonics depends upon the conducting material—steel or water conducts faster than air. Also, the temperature affects the speed. Under the same conditions, I think both sound waves and supersonic waves have the same velocity. It appears that the variable factor is the conducting material and it's teperature, rather than the wave frequencies considered. However, apparently, none of these things that set the speed

of sound have any influence whatsoever on electromagnetic radiations, which include radio waves, light, and several other classifications of waves, such as X-rays, infra-red and ultra-violet light, etc. . . .

As to the ether—I think the question of the existence of such an element (?) is very much open to debate. Personally, I think that the acceptance of this hypothesis complicates rather than simplifies the problem of what actually is involved in radiation. First, I wonder if anybody has any good reasons for believing that all electromagnetic radiations, regardless of wavelength or what medium they transverse, do not have absolutely the same velocity? This seems to be the real issue involved in the current controversy.

For the benefit of anybody who may read this and haven't read what has gone before, I might as well state briefly what this is all about—if I know. My thesis is that all electromagnetic radiations have exactly the same velocity, essentially 299,820 kilometers per second. The opposition has different ideas, lots of them. But back to the discussion.

Electric currents traveling in wires or other conductors have the same velocity as light or radio waves, and they have the same velocity regardless of the applied voltage or the circuit resistance. Resonant circuits for A. C., either series or parallel, do not change this fundamental velocity, but merely determines the circuit impedance, and also controls the voltage-current relationship of the A. C. I think current theory covers this. This being the case, the exact nature of the conductor seems totally irrelevant as far as velocity is concerned. Also, the A. C. frequency has absolutely no effect on velocity. So why should the frequency or source potential of electromagnetic radiations affect the velocity of same? Of course, different forms of energy transmission are involved, but the two situations also have a lot of factors in common, including some duplicate frequencies.

When you give light mass, you also automatically give it a lot of other qualities such as weight, inertia, momentum, recoil, and also make it subject to gravitational attraction. Then there is always the photo-electric effect of light to be accounted for. Then, too, if light has mass, there must be some substance existing in inter-galactic space, else how does the light of the outer galaxies ever reach us? Anybody have the chemical formula of the ether? That is, if there is such a thing. Element or compound? Density? And at least on Earth, doesn't a very weak beam of light have the same velocity as a very intense one? Then why not in Space? Then what becomes of the continued acceleration theory?

It seems to me that if any material object that was accelerated to the speed of light, assuming such acceleration possible, it would disintegrate into light, one of the basic manifestations of energy. This because molecular activity due to heat would cause total dissolution. Wouldn't heat be a by-product of extreme acceleration even in a theoretical vacuum? Assuming the Lorentz-Fitzgerald theory accurate, continued contraction would mean heat, wouldn't it? Also, on this theory, wouldn't a space-ship traveling at the speed of light have zero length? That's less than the diameter of an electron—result?? Energy??

On the apparent speed of light from two or more moving points of observation, as Bryant, Oberfield, and Bradley mentioned, doesn't the Doppler Effect apply very nicely to such prob-

lems? A lot of astronomy is based on that—spectrum shift, star motion, etc.

Oops, outta space. At least we aren't calling each other paralogists—YET.

Sincerely,

LEWIS SHERLOCK.

BARE FACTS

1328 N. Market
Wichita, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just read your latest issue of *PLANET* and it is pretty fair. The only thing wrong was just a little too much bare flesh in one of the stories. We can leave that out without spoiling the story any. For those whose tongues are always hanging out for smut, I would suggest "....." or some of those "....." magazines.

You have asked if future wars would be fought like it was pictured in *Electron Eat Electron*. The answer is "No" with a capital N. There is no way in which one man could even visualize let alone control a bunch of fighting units. Any future war will be fought pretty much the same way that has always been used. There will be new weapons and better coordination between the various branches of the service, but the basic idea will be the same. The Navy will control the supply routes and transport the troops while the Airforce sweeps in and batters the industrial areas, but in the end it will be the doughboy who will capture and hold the various strongholds with the bayonet. I doubt if the Atomic Bomb will be used much. After all its only real use is wholesale murder and there is no use killing off your possible customers. That is something Hitler forgot.

I enjoyed that idea of using the induction furnace as a weapon in that first story. It was something that could be readily understood while that story *Defense Mech* was rich. The method of curing that fellow's hysteria by making him think he was on Earth instead of Mars was hilarious.

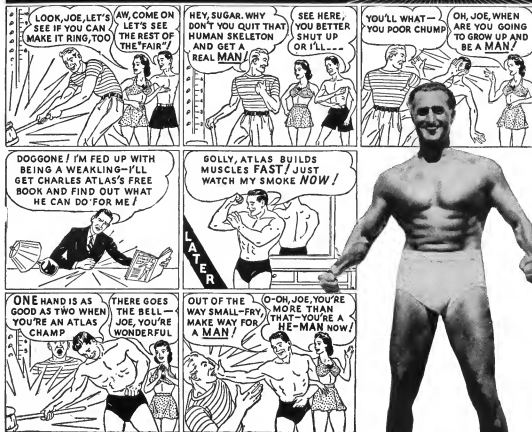
I am glad to see that the readers of *PLANET* are beginning to do a little thinking.

I know that theory has its place in science, but I do object to having theories presented as facts when they cannot be proved in actuality. Einsteins theory has never actually been proved and may never be as it is based on mathematics. Anybody can juggle figures so I have just as much right to say the following formula is correct as he has to say it is wrong. $V = T \times A$ & $T_n \times A_n = V_1 / .00$. That is, velocity depends on time multiplied by acceleration and if enough acceleration is applied for a long enough time the velocity will equal that of light and will rise toward infinity. The only way I can be proved wrong is for somebody to get into a rocket with plenty of fuel and try to go faster than light. If he finds it impossible then I will withdraw my statement. Until then it stands. As to the Doppler effect one Astronomer said that he had to expose a plate over a period of two or three nights with consequent blurred image and then measure an apparent displacement of the spectrum lines of less than one-sixty-fourth of an inch so they still hadn't been able to prove it. There is another thing, too, the air resistance increases until the speed of sound, then it begins to lessen. Figure that one out. Goodbye until next time.

Sincerely yours,

EDWIN SIGLER.

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